

The One Hoo Knows

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The One Hoo Knows

by [Twisty_Little_Passages](#)

Summary

With the return of George's arms came Captain Bob's meteoric rise to fame. His embellished tale of retrieving those lost limbs captivated the galaxy. Now Bob basks in the spotlight as an honorary Galactic Friend, though beneath his confident smile lurks the constant fear that his deception could unravel everything he's built.

At the same time, Old Fingerhead, who cannot escape his past, struggles with his own secrets. As a shadowy foe closes in, long-lost family members emerge and loyalties are tested in the Galactic Superhero family when their worlds collide...

Notes

This is a sequel to my previous GSH fic: Star-Crossed. Takes place a year after the events in that story!

Chapter 1: Lights, Camera, Conspiracy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Bob fumbled with his tie as he paced the cramped dressing room, obsessively adjusting and readjusting the knot. The universe might see Captain Bob as the daring space explorer who rescued the Galactic Superhero siblings from certain doom, but backstage, his stomach churned with the familiar acid of pre-interview anxiety, now scorching enough to leave a charred path up his throat.

"Three minutes, Captain." A production assistant passed by, briefly tapping something on their clipboard.

He nodded, the motion sending a sharp jolt through his neck. He brushed it off and straightened his shoulders, forcing his breath to slow while facing the mirror.

He'd given dozens of interviews since the Red Planet incident, but tonight he was a special guest on Shining Star Finder's talk show. The galaxy's premier astrophysicist and slick-haired heartthrob who reached billions across star systems with just his smile alone.

The backstage area felt oppressively dark compared to the glittering stage beyond the narrow gap in the curtains: all dusty and utilitarian, making even Bob's bright orange tuxedo look dull. Here, equipment cables snaked across the floor in thick tangles, ready to constrict around his ankles. The air, humming with the charge of electrical components and the ghostly nerves of guests who'd paced this same spot before him.

Through smudged, bulky monitors, Bob could see the man himself address a collection of various species, all buzzing with excitement.

"And tonight," the host's voice boomed through the studio with dramatic flair, "we welcome the man who's captured hearts across the galaxy with his courageous exploits!"

Bob gulped.

"The hero of the Red Planet rescue, the man who inadvertently saved our beloved Galactic Superhero siblings when all hope seemed lost—please welcome, the galactic explorer extraordinaire himself, Captain Bob!"

With one last inhale, Bob pushed through the curtain and the sensory assault hit him like a flash bang. The studio lights were blinding; those bright-white beams designed to expose every imperfection.

He squinted against the glare, a performer's instinct kicking in the second his vision cleared. His spine straightened, chin lifted, and when the audience erupted in cheers, the last remnants of sweat dissolved. Bob was gone. In his place, Captain Bob stood tall, ready to conquer the universe.

His legs carried him forward in confident strides, arms rising in a friendly wave, as if every audience member were a close friend. He arranged his mouth into the smile previously perfected in the mirror. Not too eager, not too self-satisfied, just the right blend of humble and heroic.

Across the stage, Shining Star Finder rose from a plush chair, extending a welcoming hand toward his guest while the white of his teeth glinted for the cameras. Appearance-wise, he was just a simple human with swooping blue hair and strong jaw. A rare thing to be in an industry dominated by aliens.

"Captain Bob, what an absolute honor it is to have you," Star Finder began, in a tone hitting that sweet spot of admiration that felt almost genuine.

"The honor's mine," Bob replied, grasping the offered hand before settling into the guest chair with deliberate casualness.

Star Finder reclaimed his seat, crossing his legs. "So, *Captain*," he said, watching Bob with condescending curiosity that he chose to ignore. "What are you captain of exactly? Do you have a crew?"

"I did man a small crew back in the day." Bob placed a hand on his chest. "We'd explore uncharted nebulae, and that's how I got most of my experience. Then I decided to go solo for a while... before I met my current crew—my family."

In the audience, he spotted his wife Sue in the front row wearing a slimming black dress dotted with galaxies, her supportive smile a calming universe in itself. Beside her sat George in all his four-armed glory, already applauding with the enthusiasm of ten beings. One elevated row behind them, Fred sat with arms crossed, wearing what could—if Bob squinted—be interpreted as a smile.

"How sweet," Star Finder waved the sentiment aside, already moving on. "Robert, my dear, the galaxy is dying to know—what's next for the dashing explorer? Another expedition? Perhaps a stork visit for our lovely Sue?"

The audience cooed, drawing blushes from the married couple. George looked puzzled by the question while Fred covered his face, hiding the colored glint in his eyes despite his suit telling the world how he really felt: nauseous.

"Maybe it's a bit early to worry about all that..." Bob rubbed his shoulder, steering the conversation elsewhere.

"Of course." Star Finder winked. "I know we're all eager to hear your firsthand account of the Red Planet rescue that's become the stuff of legend."

The audience fell silent, expectant, listening to Bob summon his clearest speaking voice to deliver the version of events he'd rehearsed so carefully. "Well, *Shining*," he began, letting the nickname linger just long enough to make the host's eye twitch, "I *suppose* I could share a few details about what really happened on that blood-red dust ball..."

His hands swept through the air, carving imaginary dangers while recounting the events leading to his discovery. "When I received those faint distress signals—signals that everyone else had dismissed as cosmic background radiation—I knew in my explorer's heart that something extraordinary awaited me there."

Fred's eyebrow rose, blood pressure spiking at the memory of George's lonely cries, desperate to break through the dense atmosphere. That was the only attempt to reach beyond the Red Planet. Fred had been powerless, their destroyed ship unable to send any distress signals. He shifted protectively above his siblings, a habit he'd never shaken even with Sue's request to take it easy on her husband. Though it didn't at all stop him from mentally drilling holes into Bob's facade on many quiet occasions.

Bob's voice dipped into a husky register when describing the treacherous landscape of the Red Planet. "The magnetic storms were like nothing I'd ever encountered. My ship barely made it through!"

A holographic display behind him shifted to show his vessel battling impossible conditions. Conditions that Fred distinctly remembered being harsh but nothing close to the apocalyptic scenario being depicted.

Bob sighed, allowing the moment to breathe, counting the beats of silence like currency. One, two, three—and right on schedule, the stillness cracked open. "When I found Sue," he continued, softening to a whisper that pulled the audience forward. "She was—is—the most... *beautiful*..." he trailed off, suddenly lost in his wife's attentive gaze.

Sue gave him a perplexed grin that rekindled his nerves. He had momentarily forgotten the millions watching across the galaxy.

George could barely contain himself. "That's my brother-in-law!" he thundered over the jabbering crowd, levitating upward in celebration and accidentally knocking down a camera drone.

Star Finder's perfect smile constricted for only a micro-beat, though the audience seemed charmed by the giant pink alien's unfiltered passion and Bob's love-struck trance. He sat back, allowing the moment to continue.

Fred rolled his eyes as Bob pulled himself together, ready to dive back into the remarkable tale of escaping an amnesiac George and discovering the Underground World. But as he listened, his special sense detected a telling warmth in the explorer's chest; an uncomfortable heat instantly recognized as guilt.

"But the true test came," Bob eagerly announced, "when I had to risk my life to retrieve George's arms."

George sprang up, waving all four arms to prove their healthy state. Fred reached over to lower them, attempting to minimize the distraction.

"His arms had been severed by the Big Fish Boss, lost in the crash," Bob continued somberly. "And the only way to retrieve them? Facing the guardian of the underground stream—a

colossal *squid* monster!"

The crowd gasped as one. Fred's jaw clenched so hard, he half-expected his teeth to crack. It wasn't known exactly where the arms came from, or how they were suddenly in Bob's possession when they found him, but there had certainly been no squid monster.

"I wrestled that beast for what felt like hours," Bob boasted, with hands mimicking a strangling motion. "Its tentacles tried to drag me to the depths, but I thought of my friends, of seeing Sue again, and I found the strength to prevail!"

"He did! He did! He saved my arms!" George cheered wildly.

"And thanks to Sue's magical healing abilities, the arms were restored like they were never apart!" Bob gestured toward his wife, who waved back bashfully.

"Ah, *yes*, Sue's stunning healing song," Star Finder gushed. "A voice that can raise the dead from their graves—just to witness its pure beauty!"

A spotlight suddenly blazed upon Sue, causing her to flinch and shield her eyes. Fred instinctively leaned over her chair, his body coiled as if ready to intercept a threat. Through the space between her fingers, she could barely see the host on stage target her with a fang-baring grin.

"Susan, baby doll!" Star Finder sang out. "You are probably the brightest star in the galaxy—just a hell of a catch! You know how many men would *KILL* to be in your husband's place?"

"Uh... I don't..." Sue shrank into herself, painfully aware of the countless eyes dissecting her.

Bob's smile vanished. A sharp, protective sensation spurred him toward action, yet he remained hopelessly stuck in place. Fred's scowl was buried in shadow, but the flashing of his suit and eyes telegraphed a rage that needed no translation.

Bob bit his inner lip, the taste of copper quickly swallowed. "Say, Shining—"

"Honey, why don't you show my audience what your powers can do?" the host interrupted mischievously. "I heard your head does the strangest thing when you sing."

"My head?" she croaked. "Yes, um, it... detaches. I can do it at will, actually."

"SHOW US!" Star Finder leaned in with snaky pupils, clenching one fist and gripping the arms of his chair with another.

The crowd began chanting for the demonstration. Sue's fingers twisted in her lap, the request teetering between spectacle and humiliation. After a moment's hesitation, she inhaled and complied, allowing her head to detach and float above her body.

The audience roared with cheers—everyone except her family, who remained stiff and silent. The songstress' head floated back down shortly after, and when the spotlight finally shut off, she remembered how to breathe again.

"Wow! Just wow, folks!" the host blared. "These superheroes and their crazy tricks, am I right? I wonder what else she can detach..."

Bob's face darkened, the red creeping dangerously up his neck while fighting for restraint, but he maintained just enough composure to stay silent. There would be formal complaints later. Plenty of them.

"Alright, alright, enough messing around..." Star Finder waved a hand with transparent insincerity. "Back to the story."

Bob exhaled, straightening his posture and slicking his hair back. The tale continued, but Fred's attention was elsewhere, noticing Sue's trembling hand on her lap, the embarrassment palpable even without a special sense. He touched her shoulder lightly; a silent check-in. She responded with nothing more than a soft pat on his knuckles and a strained smile that spoke volumes.

Just as Fred sank back into the seat, a prickle of warning shattered his focus. Something shifted in the emotional landscape of the room. As the audience beamed happily, he detected a different current from the back row. Calculated interest, cool and analytical, cutting through the emotional soup.

He angled his body slightly, maintaining a neutral expression for the cameras while seeking the source. In the last row sat a thick-coated figure, partly shadowed by a large hat and glasses. Unlike the captivated beings around them, who hung on Bob's every theatrical word, this observer's lips remained tight, their demeanor cold even during the collective applause. The emotions felt wrong; not entertained or impressed, but hungry. Collecting information for some specific purpose.

When Bob wrapped up with a cheesy cliff-hanger, Star Finder relaxed a palm on his chin. "Extraordinary courage, Captain," he swooned. "If it weren't for you, these heroes would be lost to myth!"

The explorer waved away the compliment with prepped modesty. "I only did what anyone would do in my position. Though I suppose not everyone has my particular set of skills." He winked and pointed to the crowd, triggering another wave of adoration.

"And now?" Star Finder prompted. "What's next for the honorary Galactic Friend? You must be proud of that title, not to mention the perks that come with it. Much better than the *lonely life* of a supposed solo captain—that's for sure..."

"I'm... just grateful to have played my part in returning our beloved superheroes to us. As for what's next," Bob paused, staring into space momentarily. "You'll all see me and my family at the Galactic Gala tomorrow night, of course! I hear they've planned something... rather *special* for a new guest of honor. No spoilers."

Excited chatter rippled through the studio. The Galactic Gala: the most prestigious annual event in the cosmos, exclusive to Galactic Friends, their guests, and royal dignitaries. All who gather to celebrate the latest in peacekeeping achievements.

As the interview concluded, Fred turned his attention back to the rear of the room. The suspicious figure had vanished. He stood, scanning the departing audience members. His gaze snagged on an exit door, swinging shut. Through the narrowing gap, a flash of turquoise skin scurried out of sight.

A sudden, inexplicable foreboding burned through Fred's body, his special sense overloading with warning until he forced his attention back to his family. Sue was being led backstage while George happily accepted a plate of snacks from a staff member. Fred shook off the feeling as he moved toward them. Whatever the stranger's intentions, he chose to ignore it. At least for now.

Meanwhile, in another corner of the galaxy, far removed from the broadcast's dazzling lights, an ancient screen flickered with infomercials in the lowest level of a sketchy mothership.

The Barnacle: a fishing ship resting spot whose namesake clung to the ship's underbelly, impossible to remove without damaging the surrounding honeycomb structure. The establishment reeked of cheap alcohol and cigar smoke, its artificial lighting sputtering without pattern or reason.

Old Fingerhead's finger-tentacles curled slightly at the base of his skull as he concentrated; a gesture no different to a fist clenching. A dull blade flashed between his splayed fingers, metal blurring against the stained tabletop. The weapon was rusty and notched from countless similar games, whipping faster with each pass.

"Faster, lad," growled a brogue accent. Its owner leaned in—scarred face, three good eyes, and one milky blind one watching with scrutiny. "You're stabbin' like me misses for fish sake."

Fingerhead didn't bother to respond. His aquamarine skin glistened with a thin sheen of focus under the sickly yellow lights. Around the table, five deep-space fishermen watched with the tense anticipation of beings who had precious little entertainment between long, lonely voyages.

Their weathered faces mapped the harsh realities of cosmic radiation and recycled air that never truly tasted fresh. None would admit they gathered here as much for companionship as for the cheap booze.

"Double or nothing—you'll nick yourself before thirty seconds," a gaunt one sneered with fist tittering against the edge of the table.

Fingerhead's expression remained impassive. Above the grimy bar counter, the television's volume increased. The bartender reached up to adjust the antenna, revealing a clearer image of a pristine studio set.

"—THE HERO OF THE RED PLANET RESCUE—CAPTAIN BOB—" announced the fragmented audio as the camera panned to a human male in a garish orange suit. His green hair gleamed with product that cost more than Fingerhead's monthly fuel budget.

The knife paused mid-stab, hovering a millimeter above Fingerhead's nicked skin. A microsecond's hesitation—just enough to nearly cost him a finger—before the blade resumed its rhythm, slightly off-beat.

"Bloody hell, that was close," muttered the closest fisherman. He squinted at the screen, then at Fingerhead. "Aye... you know that pretty boy don't cha?"

The knife continued its dance, but a muscle twitched in the owner's jaw. The tentacles at the back of his head curled tighter, a sure sign of agitation to anyone who bothered to know him well enough.

"I know what he ain't," Fingerhead finally responded, the sound from his throat like crushed gravel.

"What's that supposed to mean?" pressed the nosy fisherman, never knowing when to shut up.

There was no answer. Fingerhead took a short break to finish the contents of his mug, eyes fixed on the television, unreadable. Then when the game continued, the knife moved faster than ever between his fingers, intrigue of the interview providing fuel for precision rather than distraction.

"—COLOSSAL SQUID MONSTER—" scrolled the caption as Bob described wrestling some imaginary beast for George's severed arms.

The knife spun in the air before it plunged downward with devastating force, bypassing Fingerhead's fingers entirely and embedding itself three inches deep into the solid wood of the table, sending a shivering shockwave that stunned all in its radius. Conversation ceased. The clinking of glasses halted. Every head turned toward the source.

Fingerhead stood abruptly, his chair scraping against the floor with an ugly screech. The knife quivered in the table, an exclamation point punctuating his wordless actions before it was extracted back with an effortless pull. He tossed a handful of credits onto the bar table, not bothering to count them. They scattered across the surface, some falling to the floor unheeded. Wordless, he stalked toward the exit. But before reaching the door, slurred words sliced through the momentary silence.

"Aye look, that fancy star-fella's making Sue pop her head off—*ha!*"

Fingerhead halted mid-stride. His eyes flicked toward the TV, reluctant yet compelled. And there she was. Sue's expression of unease there for all the galaxy to see.

"Would ya look at that!" someone shouted. "Man, that Sue... what I wouldn't give to get those healing hands wrapped around me for a night." The leering lilt belonged to a thick-necked Martian, gleaming with debauchery as he nudged his drinking companion. "Shame that's all she's worth."

Fingerhead's tentacles went completely still. The knife, clutched tight in his hands, began slowly rotating toward the noise.

"Heard she's slumming it with pretty boy now," the Martian continued, spitting crud onto the floor. "But we all know what she really needs is—"

He never finished his thought. Fingerhead's knife connected with the wall between them, sending drinks flying in all directions as they flinched. Their heads whipped toward the lingering shadow by the door.

"Say another word," Fingerhead growled a dangerously low register as he stepped forward.

The thick-necked alien's companion let out a wheezing laugh, grog dribbling down his chin. "Well, well, seems like we hit a nerve." He leaned back, eyes narrowing with malicious delight. "The great Fingerhead, defender of a superhero's honor. How touching."

Fingerhead's eyes widened, caught in his own reaction and what it revealed. He tried to brush it off with a snarl, but the damage was done. The patrons sensed blood in the water.

"I'm not defending anyone."

"Oh, I think you are," the Martian said, finding courage in the bottom of his glass. "I think you've gone soft for heroics. Everybody knows you helped save a precious colony with 'em. Must be tough seeing those *space-pigs* get all the glory, huh?"

"Aw, leave his friends alone! Don't you know he and that Fred fella are besties?" Another fisherman chimed in. "I thought the lad was smart enough to choose better company. Alas, they've been seen together lotsa times, real *chummy*."

Their collective laughter mixed together like a toxic brew. "And George!?" the Martian shouted. "Don't blame him. That brain-damaged nit-wit would be friends with anyone."

That was the final straw. Fingerhead grabbed the Martian by the slimy throat and lifted him clear off the ground. His companions scattered like rats, chairs overturning in their haste.

"Listen carefully," Fingerhead hissed. "I don't give a damn about superheroes. But I do care about respect. And you're running dangerously low on my supply."

The Martian's eyes bulged as his feet kicked uselessly in the air. Around them, the other patrons backed away, forming a cautious circle. But as seconds burned, they edged closer, confidence building momentum as steel and plasma slowly materialized in their hands.

"Fin!" The voice that twitched out of his tentacles was compassionate, concerned; Young Mouthbottom making an untimely appearance, forcing Fingerhead to stiffen. "Put him down, please. He's not worth it."

The circle of fishermen halted their advance. They all knew the alien wasn't alone in that body, but few had ever heard the other half of him speak. The tension wavered, hostility lingering between fear and fascination. Fingerhead's grip flexed, just for a second, before he finally released. The Martian crumpled to the floor like a gutted fish gasping for water.

Without another word, the victor turned and strode out of the bar. The door slammed shut shortly after, though it failed to swallow the last trace of his presence. The knife, still stuck in

the wall, now found a new home amongst other gritty decor.

The fishermen exchanged wide glances in silence before turning their heads to the television. The vibrations of the door had sent the antenna askew, causing the screen to crackle. Within the fuzzy image, Bob thanked the fans who showered him in praise.

Moments later, the picture vanished, left to drown in the static.

Chapter End Notes

Fingerhead is a leather jacket wearing bad boy and there's nothing you can do to stop me.

Chapter 2: Split Feelings

Chapter Notes

In this chapter I mention something called a "cephaloduo". That is my headcanon name for Fingerhead/Mouthbottom's species! Not very original: "cephalo" means "head" and "duo" means... duo. Yeah.

A barren asteroid drifted through the cosmic sea, its meager gravity just enough to keep Old Fingerhead anchored as he sat in the habitual solitude of fishing. Against the infinite, he was nothing more than a hunched silhouette; a lone fisherman on the edge of nowhere, dangling hope on a line.

This rock—this specific, unremarkable chunk of space debris—floated precisely along a galactic intersection where the elusive dust angel would swim through. The creature migrated across this sector only once a season before retreating to nebulous clouds for the remainder of its life cycle. So he waited, patient in his pursuit of what many dismissed as mere legend.

Carefully, he fine-tuned the tension on his custom-built deep space fishing rod. "Come to papa, you slippery bastard," he muttered, squinting at a faint shimmer in the distance.

The fishing line, nearly invisible save for the occasional glint of starlight, vanished into the inky black above. The casting technique was as natural to him as breathing now, the years of practice long since faded into muscle memory.

Next to him lay a rusty tackle box, each section meticulously sorted by type, size, and color of bait. His whiskey-filled thermos rested within arm's reach, though each time his hand hovered over it, a grudging tingle in his head reminded him to drink in moderation.

He glanced at a broken-strapped watch in his palm, detecting movement above seconds later. Right on schedule, a school of fish arrived and swam around the bait. Three months of tracking, researching, and preparation led to this moment, for one perfect catch that had eluded him time and again.

"Just a little closer..." Subtly, nearly indiscernible, he jiggled the line to catch their attention. The dust angel was notoriously skittish, known to detect the slightest disturbance in the gravitational field. One wrong move and—

"Say, Fin Fin, I was wondering... do you think a golden tie would be a bit tacky for the Gala? I was thinking perhaps a more humble cerulean necklace might complement our complexion better."

Fingerhead's tentacles snapped from their tight coil, unfurling into a smile that perfectly inverted his scowl—two souls sharing one face. His eyes brightened and his posture straightened as if yanked by a puppet string.

"Not now, Mouthbottom!" Fingerhead hissed, teeth grinding as he fought against the neural hijack of his brother and the invisible hooks that sunk into his nervous system. "I'm busy."

"But the Gala is tonight!" Mouthbottom persisted, taking over once again to swing their feet giddily off the edge of rock. "We must decide what we'll be wearing. One can't show up to the Galactic Gala looking like some common fisherman, can one?"

Fingerhead grunted, wrestling his own flesh back into submission, his spine bowing under the pressure of their internal tug-of-war. "I told you yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that—I. Ain't. Going."

"But Fred specifically asked for us to attend," Mouthbottom maintained a playful tone, even as his brother mentally shoved him back into the cerebral depths. "He's been trying to reach us for months! Don't you think it's time we stop ignoring him?"

Their entire skeleton froze. The biological battlefield within them felt suddenly encased in ice. Mouthbottom instinctively lowered his mouth defensively against their neck. The fishing rod rattled, sending vibrations through the line that scattered the approaching school of fish.

"Don't start," Fingerhead growled. "Don't even *say* that name. Word's been spreading that we're *good pals*—well we ain't! I don't care what he says, or what the galaxy thinks just because I was forced to help him that *one* time."

"Oh! That reminds me." Without warning, Fingerhead's body lurched forward as Mouthbottom seized control of their arms. From a hidden compartment in their pink fishing overalls, he produced a crumpled newspaper, smoothing it out with evident pride. "Can we read this article now? You and Fred are on the front page!"

Fingerhead reclaimed control to open it roughly with both hands. Splashed across the pages were photographs of him and Fred at the Cosmic Canteen. Fingerhead belting out some drunken ballad while Fred's suit flashed with encouraging colors, both of them laughing like old friends.

"Isn't it marvelous?" Mouthbottom gushed, twisting their arms to his front—which was Fingerhead's back—to flip through the pages. "And here's another one of us helping Fred board our ship! And this one after the crash when Fred pretended he was going to kiss you—how precious!"

"What the hell—" Fingerhead switched the paper to face him, his face cycling through shades of blue as he read the accompanying article. "*Sources close to the heroes suggest this unlikely friendship has been brewing for years... Fred's mysterious absences now explained... Has the galaxy's most elusive bachelor finally been won over by a once-rebellious charmer!?*"

His hands began to shake, an eyelid twitching as he recalled the memories with Fred. Memories now tainted. "They think we're... they're making it sound like we're..."

"Best friends!" Mouthbottom finished cheerfully. "Which we are, aren't we? Well, you and Fred, I mean. I do so enjoy our little get-togethers though."

Fingerhead's blood boiled with visible steam leaking from his pores. "There were no *get togethers*, Bottom! This is **SLANDER!** And you know what? All this stupid gossip is probably just some publicity stunt for his *precious* image!"

"Oh, don't be so dramatic. He would never—"

"Wouldn't he?" Fingerhead's voice cracked with hysteria. "Think about it, you naive fool! What better way to protect his reputation and improve his standing with the Galactic Friends than to show he can reform someone like me? The perfect redemption story!"

He jabbed at one of the photos with an accusing finger. "Look at this caption: '*Hero's compassion transforms even the most hardened criminal.*' Don't you see? I'm his charity case! His *pet* project!"

"That's not true," Mouthbottom protested unconvinced. "The little guy genuinely cares about us. I can feel it when we're together—"

"Can you?" Fingerhead snarled. "Or is that just what he wants you to feel? He's got those emotional projection powers, remember? Who's to say he wasn't manipulating us the whole time?"

The dust angel, sensing the violent emotional disturbance, fled into the deeper void. Fingerhead didn't notice. He was too busy crumpling the newspaper into an increasingly tight ball.

"Fin, my brother, Fred would NEVER do such a thing and you know it. Plus, you can't avoid him forever," Mouthbottom continued, softer now. "The invitation is quite clear—all associates of the Galactic Friends are welcome. That includes us!"

A gentle solar breeze pushed a golden object into view above them. The invitation rotated slowly, revealing embossed letters spelling: "HONORED GUEST OF THE GALACTIC FRIENDS".

Despite Fingerhead's best efforts to destroy it—crushing it into a ball only to have it spring back to its original form, attempting to burn it left it unscathed, and finally when all other options failed, hurling it into the void—the invitation's ornate surface still caught the starlight, mockingly intact.

"We ain't associates." Fingerhead retracted his line back to recast it. "I much prefer the company of fish to those pompous, self-important—"

"We did provide fishing nets to aid in the defeat of the Big Fish Boss..."

"—stuck-up, glory-seeking—"

"We also found George's arms and managed to return them..."

"—high horse riding—"

"And that business with the electric serpent—"

"ENOUGH!" Fingerhead roared, the sound ripping a whole in the vacuum around them. His consciousness pushed back hard, leaving Mouthbottom with no other option than to retreat. "I'm fishing. You're shutting up. End of discussion."

But even as silence fell between the cephaloduo, Fingerhead could feel Mouthbottom's presence lurking just beneath the surface of their linked consciousness, patient and persistent. This argument was far from over.

The invitation floated tauntingly in his peripheral vision, but he refused to acknowledge it. Even if the glint burned straight through his cornea, the pain was brushed aside. Before him, a more important matter came into view, the fish were regrouping, cautiously approaching his bait once more.

As he stared down his prey, something else loomed in the stars; a strange ripple in the cosmic ocean. Fingerhead's attention shifted to it briefly before being drawn back to the fish. The most beautiful specimen he'd ever seen inched closer to the bait. He held his breath, shoulders arching in anticipation. This was it. The moment when—

Thwap.

The gala invitation smacked him square in the face. Fingerhead recoiled as if stung by a wasp, nearly dropping the rod as he swatted at the offending paper.

"ARE YOU SERIOUS?" He crushed the paper in his fist. "THAT IS IT!"

He searched the dusty ground until his fingers closed around a jagged asteroid fragment. His jittery movements were hardly contained as he wrapped the invitation around the rock, securing it with several tight loops of spare fishing line.

"Let's see you float back from THIS!" He scrambled to his feet and hurled the weighted invitation with all his might. It sailed away, spinning end over end until it disappeared among the stars.

Fingerhead watched it vanish, his breath coming in short, angry bursts from flaring nostrils. The silence that followed felt rigged with explosives. Mouthbottom, sensing the tension, kept quiet.

Gradually, his breathing slowed. The knot in his throat eased as he turned his attention back to the matter at hand. The school of angels had scattered again during his outburst, but a solitary glint in the distance suggested they hadn't gone far.

"All right then," he murmured, picking up the rod. "Back to it."

He waited as minutes stretched into what felt like eons, remaining statue-still, only his eyes tracking the faint movements above. Then—so subtle he almost missed it—a slight vibration traveled up the line. His fingers tightened instinctively around the rod.

Another vibration, stronger this time.

Then the rod bent. Not in a gentle curve, but in a violent whiplash that nearly yanked it from his grasp.

"Holy—!" Fingerhead reeled back, bracing against the asteroid's meager gravity while fighting the force pulling against him.

The line went taut, cutting through the darkness like a silver laser. Whatever was on the other end was massive; far larger than any fish had right to be.

"Got you. I FINALLY GOT YOU!" A grin split his worn face for the first time in months. He dug his double-sided feet into the asteroid's surface, feeling the entire mass of rock shift underneath.

The line screamed as he struggled to reel it in. The angel's diamond-white scales and flowing tail fins wrapped around the darkness like a halo, reflecting light in all directions. This was no ordinary specimen. This was the alpha of the school.

An unstoppable fish met an immovable fisherman. That is, until the dust angel changed tactics, swimming directly toward the asteroid. The abrupt slack nearly sent Fingerhead tumbling into space.

"Oh no you don't," he muttered, reeling frantically. "You're not getting away that easy."

It circled the asteroid once, then twice, before making another desperate dive. Fingerhead anticipated the move this time, shifting his weight to absorb the impact. Every fiber of his being burned as he pulled back, gaining precious inches.

Finally, the angel's movements grew sluggish, ultimately surrendering to his pull. With a final heave, he dragged the magnificent creature onto the rock where it flopped weakly, its scales reflecting victory in Fingerhead's wild eyes.

"Gotcha!" he crowed.

The fish was easily twice as large as any dust angel he'd ever dreamed of catching. But as he removed the hook and reached for his net, eager to claim his trophy, it stiffened. Its gills spread wide and its body swelled rapidly.

"What the—"

The fish's mouth opened to an impossible width and shot forth something green and slimy, striking Fingerhead directly on his bulbous nose with a wet splat.

"GAAAH!" He stumbled back, desperately clawing at his face to remove the disgusting goop now dripping from his hands.

Something solid clung to his forehead. He pulled it from the fish's secretions and wiggled away the gunk, his expression morphing from revulsion to disbelief. Golden edges gleamed through the mucus, the bold lettering unmistakable despite its coating.

"No." He shook his head, voice rising with each repetition. "No, no, no, NO."

The invitation—the very same one he'd wrapped around a rock and hurled into the void moments ago—dangled obnoxiously between his fingers. Behind him, the dust angel made a sound suspiciously like laughter before flopping back into the abyss, disappearing with a flick of its tail.

Fingerhead was too stunned to mourn the loss. A hollow groan escaped him as he collapsed onto the asteroid, as if the universe itself had cut his strings. From this angle, sprawled on his back, he stared blankly at the endless stars winking down at him.

Maybe he'd stay here forever, become one with the dust. *'Here Lies the Alien Who Fossilized Self Out of Spite'* would make a decent epitaph.

"I give up," he croaked, lungs deflating with a whistling laugh. He weakly flung the slimy invitation away, only for it to loop back and land perfectly inside his tackle box. "You hear that, universe? You win."

A warm sensation spread through his consciousness. Mouthbottom bubbled to the surface, limbs flailing in the barren soil and making his own dust angel.

"Gasp! Do you mean it? We're actually going?"

Fingerhead closed his eyes and massaged his temples. "On one condition."

"Anything!" Mouthbottom practically sang.

"You handle all the talking. All the smiling. All the..." he waved his hand vaguely, "...pointless... socializing! I'll retreat into our consciousness and pretend I'm not there."

"But what about the press? They're bound to be there too. I know being featured in that article was very upsetting..."

"It doesn't matter. The damage has been done."

"Well, in that case... splendid! I accept your terms!"

"And we're staying one hour. Maximum. Then we're leaving, no arguments."

"That's more than one condition—but okay!"

Fingerhead grunted, and Mouthbottom understood it as a sign of complete surrender, prompting him to eagerly jump to his feet and take charge.

Back on their small fishing vessel, Mouthbottom whirled through their cramped quarters, flinging open storage compartments that hadn't seen daylight in years. Dust billowed through

the cabin as he searched for suitable attire.

"This simply won't do," he tutted, holding up a formal jacket with more patches than original fabric. "When was the last time we attended anything requiring proper attire?"

Fingerhead remained silent. Mouthbottom continued rifling through their meager collection of non-fishing clothes. "Hey! how about this?" he exclaimed, holding up a flashy leisure suit that perfectly captured the spirit of grooviness.

Fingerhead emerged briefly to look over the attire. "No."

"What about—"

"No."

After an hour of proposals and rejections, they reached an impasse. Fingerhead refused anything eye-catching, while Mouthbottom wouldn't dare consider what he called "funeral attire".

"Maybe... perhaps..." Mouthbottom hesitated, sensing the fragility of their negotiation. "What if we wear a plain black suit, but with just one accessory?"

Fingerhead narrowed their eyes. "What kind of accessory?"

From nowhere, Mouthbottom produced a pink bow tie so aggressively shiny it could only be described as radioactive. It was the size of a small dinner plate, adorned with sparkles that glittered in the moonlight.

"Yeah... no."

"It's just one small accessory," Mouthbottom pleaded. "One tiny concession for my complete handling of all social interactions?"

Fingerhead glared at the offending fabric through the mirror, regretting that long-ago purchase made to impress a one-off date who'd never called back.

"Fine."

"Excellent! We have an agreement!" Mouthbottom clapped their hands together. "Ooh, this will be magnificent! Just think of all the fascinating people we'll meet—or rather, that *I'll* meet!"

"One hour," Fingerhead reiterated firmly. "No promises. No commitments."

"Of course, brother," Mouthbottom agreed all too quickly.

"And absolutely no dancing."

"Well—"

"No. Dancing."

Fingerhead resumed control as he jabbed coordinates into the navigation system to initiate the launch sequence. As they pulled away from the asteroid, he cast one last longing look at the peaceful solitude he was leaving behind.

The ship eventually settled into orbit around Galactic Headquarters, where the massive mothership loomed above a serene blue-green planet. Its docking bays teemed with vessels from across the galaxy, each more advanced than the last.

"Well, brother, shall we?" Mouthbottom put on his most elegant accent while fancifully wiggling their shared fingertips.

He didn't respond. A subtle movement had caught Fingerhead's eye; a sneaky shuffle near the engine compartment. The shift to hunting mode was automatic. Years of paranoia had honed his instinct to notice even the slightest anomalies.

A Hoo Hoo was on his ship.

Fingerhead expertly inched toward the ventilation duct where he heard skittering. In one fluid motion, his hand shot inside and emerged with a squirming, pink-skinned creature clutched firmly in his grasp.

"Hoo! Hoo!" The Hoo Hoo's circular mouth puckered in protest.

"Not today, you little parasite."

Fingerhead carried the creature by its foot to a small ejection pod built into the wall; a custom addition he'd installed after the third Hoo Hoo infestation. He deposited the small alien inside, ignoring both its plaintive hooting and Mouthbottom's disapproving tuts.

"Must you be so rough? The little fella is petrified!"

The Hoo Hoo pressed its tiny hands against the transparent pod, its expression shifting from indignation to something that looked like devastating fear.

"Hoo," it said softly, its voice muffled behind the glass. "Hoo hoo hoo."

"Nice try, buddy." Fingerhead pressed the eject button.

The pod shot away with a pressurized hiss, tumbling into outer space across the ship's viewport. Amused, Fingerhead watched the Hoo Hoo's pink face grow smaller as it spun away.

"Now was that really necessary?" Mouthbottom chided. "The poor creature might have just been looking for shelter."

"They're never just looking for shelter," Fingerhead replied, returning to the controls.

"They're looking for ships to *infest*. Give 'em an inch..."

Fingerhead set course for the headquarters docking bay while Mouthbottom, already forgetting about the Hoo Hoo, vibrated with excitement and adjusted their bowtie.

Though something shivered in the fisherman's mind when they passed the mothership's security force field. A chilly feeling that they were being watched.

He glanced at his sensors, but they showed nothing unusual. Even as their ship settled into the assigned dock, Fingerhead couldn't shake the sensation that something was wrong.

What neither noticed was the subtle glimmer in the darkness behind them.

A distortion in the starfield rippled like heat over desert sand. As the ejection pod tumbled away, the strange aura stalked toward it. An invisible tractor beam lashed out to trap the pod in its bubble and an ebony-cloaked ship's maw opened like a hungry black hole, swallowing the tiny capsule before its stealth systems re-engaged completely.

The cephaloduo paused at the entrance of the gala, taking a breath so deep it burned his chest. In surrendering entirely, Fingerhead unintentionally discovered something he never thought he'd do so willingly: he let go.

Chapter 3: The Galactic Gala, Part 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Fred stood sentinel at the base of the grand staircase in the Galactic Headquarters Ballroom, nodding mechanically to each arriving dignitary while his paws unconsciously tugged at the suffocating collar underneath his maroon tuxedo.

The gathering before him stretched like a polluted ocean, beautiful on the surface yet drowning in ego and competing achievements deep down. The space buzzed with the peculiar energy that forms when too many important people occupy the same room: a mixture of perfume, ambition, and thinly veiled threats disguised as compliments.

"Howdy-do howdy-do!" The Caterpillar Minister slithered up, his segments undulating with excitement. "Lookin' good, Fredrick!"

"That's right," echoed the sentient hat perched on the Minister's head, its unblinking gaze fixed on Fred as its master continued blabbering. "So glad you could make it! The Gala sure is a riot this year!"

"Yes, indeed!" the hat cheeped.

Fred clasped his hands behind his back and straightened his posture like a soldier addressing a superior. "Wouldn't miss it," he replied, cutting through the pleasantries with paper-thin sincerity.

The Minister's emotional essence was overwhelming, but it merely set a prelude to what was sure to be another night of annual tedium Fred had grown so bitterly accustomed to.

"Enjoy! Enjoy!" The Minister was already wiggling away, leaving Fred in a cloud of glitter that materialized from nowhere as he giggled his way toward more important figures. "Goodness me!"

Fred continued his obedient greeting of attendees: Hector with his curt nod, Very Tall Friend alongside Mr. Big Arms, and even Sneezy prancing with Little King John. Fred cataloged every Galactic Friend, eyes scanning from stuffy royals to eccentric merchants. But no fisherman.

The absence wasn't surprising. Fingerhead had been dodging Fred ever since the awkward dinner with his family, yet the familiar ping of disappointment still found him despite his carefully maintained low expectations.

He hoped tonight would be different. The Galactic Gala was the one event where the most insufferable beings made appearances. The possibility of easing the night's frustrating formalities with the fisherman's blunt observations and irreverent commentary had Fred catching himself leaning on the tips of his toes.

The hero brushed a paw over the rubbery nubs on his head, bending them back and letting them bob into place. Irritation manifested itself in a steamed sigh as he adjusted his collar again. The fabric felt like it was slowly strangling him.

"How long are you going to keep fighting with that thing?" came a gentle voice.

"I wasn't," Fred muttered without turning, immediately knowing it was Sue that addressed him.

Sue tsked before stepping in front of her brother. There he stood awkwardly as her nimble fingers adjusted his tuxedo, his stance stiff as a child being fitted for his first day of school.

"There." She stepped back to admire her handiwork before squishing his face between her hands. "Very handsome."

"Quit it," he mumbled, cheeks warming and head ducking in the hope others wouldn't notice.

Undeterred, Sue brushed invisible dust from his shoulder pads. "You know, you're allowed to enjoy yourself. The universe won't implode if you relax for one evening."

"Who says I'm not relaxed? I'm completely relaxed."

"Your eyes tell a different story."

Fred averted his gaze, concealing whatever shade of vulnerability he'd inadvertently revealed. His attention drifted to his sister's hand, which he took in his.

"So, what about you? Are you doing okay? After that whole Star Finder nonsense..."

Her grip tightened subtly. "I told you, I'm fine. Really. I forgotten all about it already."

"Your emotions tell a different story." Fred couldn't help but smirk at his sister's defeated sigh.

From across the ballroom came a crash followed by a familiar apologetic voice that could only belong to George.

"Oh dear." Sue frowned. "That sounded expensive."

"You go ahead," Fred urged, gesturing toward the commotion. "I'll just be..."

Sue followed her brother's gaze to the staircase where new arrivals continued to pour in. She gave him an understanding nod before wading gracefully through the waters of formality, calming the ripples of disruption in her wake.

As Fred lingered, a server glided past with a tray of wine in crystal flutes. He snatched one without looking and brought it to his lips absentmindedly, resisting the urge to drink it all in one gulp.

Movement at the top of the staircase made his head perform a spraining double-take. The wine nearly sprayed from his mouth when he recognized the figure above. His grip tightened on the delicate stem of the glass, one squeeze away from shattering it.

"FREDDIE, MY GOOD MAN!" The body was Fingerhead's, but the voice was disturbingly flamboyant. "Oh my stars, what a positively SCRUMPTIOUS gathering!"

Fred stared, dumbfounded. Either Fingerhead had finally lost his last crumb of sanity, or Mouthbottom had such complete control that his voice usurped his brother's, speaking from their dominant-mouth rather than their finger-mouth.

The hero's special sense probed automatically, searching for the familiar grumpy undercurrent that always accompanied Fingerhead's presence. Nothing. Not a trace of cynicism or reluctance. Just Mouthbottom's effervescent enthusiasm, cranked to an alarming degree.

"Young Mouthbottom," Fred acknowledged, unable to fully mask his dismay. "Is that... you?"

"But of COURSE it's me!" Mouthbottom practically skipped down the remaining steps. "Who else would appreciate such a magnificent social occasion? Poor Fin would be absolutely miserable!"

The smaller alien's muzzle twitched as he caught the scent of some aggressively floral cologne. "Is he... around at all?"

"Oh, he's in here somewhere." Mouthbottom tapped their shared temple. "Buried VERY deep, I'm afraid. He made me promise to handle all the meaningless socializing. His words, not mine!"

"I see." Fred nodded, his expression carefully neutral despite the hollow feeling in his chest. He tried to ignore it, focusing instead on the being in front of him, even if it wasn't the one he'd hoped to see.

"Now, isn't this ballroom simply SPECTACULAR?" Mouthbottom spun in place, tentacles wiggling like party streamers. "The chandeliers alone must have cost a fortune! And these floors! I could eat off them—not that I would, of course, that would be terribly unhygienic—but just LOOK at that shine!"

"Indeed," Fred groaned, chugging down the rest of his wine while noting a passing royal wince at Mouthbottom's volume.

From across the room, a flash of green caught Fred's eye, peeking from behind a marble pillar. At first glance, it seemed like a leaf from a potted plant, but the intense fear radiating from it inadvertently revealed Bob's emotional signature and hiding place.

Bob pressed his back against the stone, trying to become one with the marble. The moment he spotted the fisherman, his mind had gone into full panic mode. Fingerhead. Here at the Gala. The one being in the universe who could expose his most elaborate lie and had every right to do so.

He knew Fingerhead had been invited as an honored guest, but never imagined he'd actually attend. And to make matters worse, the blue alien was acting like the life of the party, chatting and smiling. Fingerhead. Actually smiling.

Behind Bob lay a small spread of appetizers which he snatched and devoured in quick succession, stuffing them into his mouth without tasting a single one. Stress eating; Sue would recognize the signs immediately. The thought of his wife only made him eat faster.

He hastily grabbed several more comically small portions until his hand landed on someone else's. Bob glanced up to see a face he hadn't seen since his wedding day—Happyman.

"Bob!" Happyman spoke a little too loudly, roughly grabbing Bob's shoulder and holding on even as the explorer crouched toward the ground. "How's it going, buddy?"

"H-hey, Happyman," Bob gulped, his knees nearly giving out before he forced himself to bolt upright.

Happyman's trademark smile remained fixed. His spiky green hair sported his favorite red bandanna, clashing with his otherwise formal attire; a brown suit and dress pants.

Another figure appeared, tall and imposing until you caught his drowsy smile. Green Monster, Happyman's business and life partner, offered an oversized hand to Bob before pulling him in for a hug that felt more like a trap than a greeting.

"Nice to see you, old friend!" Green Monster bellowed.

"You too." Bob choked back a chuckle, his grin stretching his face unnaturally. "So," he swallowed, "how are things going with the Happy Factory?"

Happyman's smile inverted instantly. "The Happy Factory? Oh, we're doing *great*—or we would be if it weren't for those *scumbags* at Joy Junction Incorporated."

Happyman's fists collided with the table, making plates and glasses jump. Bob flinched at the sudden intensity.

"You wouldn't believe what they're pulling now! Advertising their products as '*organically sourced happiness*'. Pft! Yeah right."

Green Monster placed a patient hand on his partner's shoulder. "Oh, boy... you've opened the flood gates now, Bob."

"They're frauds!" Happyman's voice rose sharply, drawing glances from nearby dignitaries.

"They're falsifying their advertising, claiming their products are ethically superior when they're actually just using cheap harmful substitutes!"

"The worst part," Happyman continued, "people *trust* them, Bob!"

The room tilted slightly as Bob gripped the edge of the table. "That's... that's terrible," he managed, the words sticking in his throat before an unsettling giggle followed.

"You know what I always say?" Happyman placed both hands on Bob's shoulders, staring directly into his eyes. "Truth is a foundation. Without it, everything crumbles. They'll get what's coming to 'em."

Bob nodded automatically, desperately scanning the room for escape. His gaze landed on Mouthbottom, who was flirtatiously complimenting a decorative plant while Fred watched in bewilderment, downing more wine.

Green Monster pulled Happyman away from Bob, an act he seemed accustomed to whenever the other got too riled up in his beliefs.

"The public deserves to know when they've been deceived," Happyman declared, pounding his fist into his palm. "Don't you agree, Bob?" His smile reset to factory settings, bright and expectant.

"I... well, that's... I mean, context is... sometimes things aren't..."

"Bob?" Green Monster cocked his head with concern. "Are you feeling alright? You look pale."

"I'M GREAT!" Bob erupted with a shrill laugh that refused to stop despite the stares from all directions.

His laughter finally dwindled into a strangled wheeze as silence spread around him. He stood rigid, biting his lip, eyes darting everywhere and nowhere.

Happyman stepped back. "Um—"

"I HAVE TO USE THE BATHROOM," Bob blurted so loudly that it nearly sent the couple across the room.

The declaration sat quietly for a moment before Happyman cleared his throat. "Uh, alright," he said, holding onto Green Monster's arm, ready to dive behind it if another outburst occurred. "The facilities are just past the—"

Bob was already gone, weaving between guests like a hunted animal. He ducked behind a passing server, using their tray as momentary cover to slip past Mouthbottom, who was now piling an entire bowl of caviar straight into his mouth.

The bathroom door swung shut behind Bob with a force that threatened to crack the stucco walls. The extravagance continued even here; gold-flecked sinks, blinding accusatory light, and soft atmospheric music that failed to soothe.

He lurched toward the nearest sink, gripping its edges as he stared into the mirror. The reflection was a stranger—pale, sweating, eyes wide with the terror of exposure.

"Stop overthinking," he sang, turning on the faucet with shaking hands. The cool water splashed against his face, providing momentary relief before the crushing weight of self-doubt returned.

Unable to face his reflection any longer, he stumbled into the nearest stall, fumbling with the lock behind him for an uncomfortable amount of time. His stomach heaved once, twice, before he emptied its contents into the toilet. The sounds of retching drove other patrons to make hasty exits.

"Ughh," Bob groaned, collapsing against the stall door. He sat on the shiny floor, his racing mind drowning in the merciless ambient sounds of the bathroom.

Back in the ballroom, George's hollering carried across the space, catching the attention of Fred and Mouthbottom.

"MY BROTHER FROM ANOTHER FINGERHEADED MOTHER!"

Mouthbottom lit up instantly. "GEORGIE!"

From her position near a diplomatic circle, Sue gulped as she watched George and Mouthbottom embrace like long-lost siblings. The pair's combined excitement came dangerously close to toppling a nearby ice sculpture.

Sue hurried over to Fred just as he drained his third glass of wine. "Fred," she started breathlessly, "why is Fingerhead acting so... animated? I've never seen him this enthusiastic about anything!"

Fred's gaze remained fixed on the duo across the room, his expression heavy with annoyance. "That's cus it's not Fingerhead," he replied, words carrying a slight slur that made Sue's eyebrows rise. "It's Mouthbottom. Fingerhead's in hiding. Might as well not be here at all."

"Oh." Sue studied her brother's face, noting the flush in his cheeks and the subtle sway of his posture.

"Hey guys!" George floated over with Mouthbottom in tow. "Fingerhead gave Mouthbottom the reins, can you believe it!?"

Sue chuckled nervously. Fred responded with a simple grunt, low and defeated.

"George and I were just discussing what the Galactic Friends prepared in my honor!" Mouthbottom beamed. "Apparently, they've curated a chocolate fountain in the gardens that looks just like me! ME, FRED! IN ALL MY CHOCOLATY LIKENESS!"

"The garden also has a killer food spread," George added with a wink. "Last one there is a grumpy old fisherman!"

Before Sue could intervene, the two were off toward the garden entrance like children escaping adult supervision. The songstress watched them go, a familiar knot of worry forming as she turned back to Fred.

"Should we—" she began, but her brother was too busy chugging another glass of wine from a server.

Sue huffed and decided she had no choice but to follow the rowdy pair alone. Fred turned to see her depart, her flowing gown billowing behind like a surrendering flag.

Fred was tempted to intervene, but his attention shifted abruptly to a disturbance emanating from the bathroom. His special sense sniffed the air like a trained hound and his expression hardened.

"Bob..."

With heavy stomps, Fred made his way to the bathroom. The attendant stationed outside took one look at him and wisely stepped aside.

The sound of sobbing greeted him as he entered, a pitiful, broken noise. Fred passed each stall methodically, senses guiding him unerringly to the source. With every step, a nauseous feeling increased until it reached its peak at the last one.

"I can sense your guilt from across the damn galaxy, Bob." As he spoke, the crying instantly ceased. "Either you come out and tell me what you're hiding, or I'll—"

The lock clicked. The harsh echo dominated the area before the door swung open to reveal Bob, disheveled and flushed. Teary eyes rimmed with red met Fred, who's stern expression wavered immediately.

The human suddenly lunged forward, throwing himself into his brother-in-law's arms, nearly toppling him backward. Fred barely managed to keep them both upright with Bob clinging to him like a life raft.

"I can't, Fred," Bob sobbed, his voice muffled against the other's suit. "I can't take it anymore. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry!"

Fred stood frozen, arms awkwardly hovering over Bob's heaving back as he tried to process the sudden outburst. He winced and nearly gagged as the overwhelming emotions added to his drunken disorientation.

"Oh, Fred," Bob choked out, weakly lifting his head. "I never meant for it to go this far. The lie... it's eating me *alive*."

"What lie?" Fred managed to ask, placing his paws between them to recover some personal space.

"I... I never found George's arms on the Red Planet. It was Old Fingerhead. He appeared out of nowhere, handed them to me, but I—he just... vanished without explanation. And and—"

He couldn't explain further. Fred's paws squeezed the explorer's shoulders, pushing him back to arm's length harshly against the metal between stalls.

"He *what*?" The husk in his voice nearly gave way to a growl.

Bob struggled to swallow something in his throat, as if trying to take back everything he said. Knowing it was too late for that, he pushed through. "H-he said s-something about finding

them while fishing... t-then he was gone before I could ask questions."

Fred stared at the floor, pupils shrinking as his thoughts swam. "But why did—"

"I was supposed to be the hero," Bob cut in, reaching out to mirror Fred's clutch on his shoulders. "The one who saved your brother. How could I tell everyone that I just... accepted a package delivery? That I didn't really do anything?"

"So I was right all along," Fred uttered, devoid of color. "You invented those stories. You claimed glory that wasn't yours." His jaw tightened. "You let my brother worship you for something Fingerhead did."

Bob nodded miserably, his sagging body would have crumpled to the floor if not for Fred's tight grip. "At first, it was just going to be a small embellishment. But then the press got involved, and Sue was looking at me with those eyes, and—"

"You wanted to impress her." Fred's thin fur bristled. "You manipulated her. Used her feelings for you to build yourself up."

"No, I... well yes—but you have to understand," Bob pleaded, clinging to Fred's arms as he tried to pull away. "Please, I'm so... sorry. I never wanted to hurt anyone. Least of all Sue and George."

Fred pushed the human away, forcing himself to breathe steadily while slowly clenching and unclenching his fists at his sides. His special sense detected genuine remorse, but it did little to cool his burning fury. He turned to lean over a sink.

"You will tell Sue and George everything before this night ends," Fred stated, his tone leaving no room for negotiation as he stared down Bob's reflection in the mirror. "Or I will."

Bob's shoulders slumped, the fight draining out of him. Yet as he accepted his fate, he felt heavy relief. The prospect of unburdening himself had become its own small comfort.

"I will. I promise." He straightened himself. "I've wanted to come clean for months. I just... needed a push. Thank you for giving me the chance to make it right myself."

"Just get yourself together. We have much to discuss when this is all over." Fred dismissed him with a quick glance, unwilling to hear another word.

Bob nodded, sprinting back to the private stalls. "I'm just gonna rehearse my confession and uh, maybe gather some courage..." he peeped from behind the closing door.

"Of course you are." Fred rolled his eyes.

With a resolute exhale, Fred made his way to the exit, now an alien on a mission. He needed to find Mouthbottom and hopefully have a word with a certain repressed fisherman. Fingerhead had some serious explaining to do.

Chapter End Notes

Yay HM and GM cameo!! I have a headcanon that Happyman is very passionate about his opinions and tends to see things with little nuance. Uh oh.

I really wanted to add more characters doing stuff but it didn't fit in with the plot. Like where is Ratboy??? SHRUG

If you like Sneezy and John though, they will have their chance to shine later. :)

Chapter 4: The Galactic Gala, Part 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Fred reached the garden terrace, the scene resembled a food-based post-apocalyptic wasteland. In the center; the chocolate fountain. It was, as Mouthbottom had described, a perfect, flowing replica of Fingerhead standing in a heroic pose. A detail that was now, in light of recent revelations, profoundly appropriate.

Sue paced in a frenzy nearby with mascara streaking down her cheeks. The songstress' gown was now a canvas of colorful sauces, but even still, her arms outstretched in a futile attempt to salvage what was left of order.

"Please, gentlemen!" Sue cried. "Why don't we direct all this energy to more... diplomatic activities?"

A glob of something flew past, her plea ignored. Through the manicured shrubbery, George and Mouthbottom darted about, both completely slathered in chocolate. They launched gourmet projectiles at each other like soldiers in a battlefield, oblivious to Sue's distress and the destruction they were causing.

It seemed clear to Fred, that what began as a playful skirmish had devolved into full-scale culinary warfare. Nearby diplomats, initially aghast, found themselves inexplicably drawn into delicious combat. Political tensions that had simmered for decades found release through weaponized delectables.

"You're done for, Mouthbottom!" George hollered, each limb armed with a different delicacy. "I got four arms and I know how to use 'em!"

Mouthbottom squealed like a delighted hog, diving behind an overturned table to dodge a missile of macarons. While wearing a salad bowl as a makeshift helmet, he popped up just long enough to fling a handful of miniature quiche 'grenades' before ducking back into cover.

A particularly aggressive volley of cream puffs sailed overhead of Sue. Her heel caught on a fallen serving tray, prompting her to yelp as she stumbled.

"Fear not, fair maiden!" Mouthbottom burst forth from his fortress to sweep Sue up in a dramatic rescue. "I shall protect you!"

Sue gasped, wrapping her arms around his neck as he spun away to outrun an incoming aerial attack by George.

"Hey, no fair! You can't use my sister as a human shield!"

Sue's detached head floated away to avoid airborne pie that, as a result, splattered on Mouthbottom's face. "I'm BEGGING you both!" she cried. "If we can just—"

"STOP!"

In the harsh light of Fred's command, every combatant stopped suspended within their battle-stances. The only sounds left over were the splattering bits of food-fare dropping from their raised hands and the click of Sue's heels when Mouthbottom set her down.

Sue's head descended and she twisted it back on her body. Relieved, she walked over to thank Fred, but he gently pushed past her, already striding purposefully across the terrace with his intense gaze locked on Mouthbottom alone.

"You." Fred pointed directly at the suddenly sheepish figure. "I need to speak with Fingerhead. Not. You."

Mouthbottom deflated, clutching his bowl helmet against his chest. "B-but Freddie, my dear fellow, Fin doesn't... well, I don't think that's a very good idea. Um, so, please leave a message after the beep?" he squeaked, shrinking lower. "*Beeeeep...*"

The inferno in Fred's eyes charred a hole right through the pitiful excuse. "Now, Mouthbottom."

Mouthbottom stepped back and nervously glanced at George, who seemed uneasy watching him comply to Fred's demand. Eventually, he surrendered with a sigh. "Very well..."

The cephaloduo somberly shut his eyelids. The warm aura surrounding him vanished like ice under a blowtorch. When his eyes reopened, they held none of Mouthbottom's sparkle—only Fingerhead's burnt out embers.

He blinked, taking in the scene before him: the flowing chocolate replica of himself, at George's chocolate-smeared face, at the mess, the drama, the sheer, unadulterated feeling of something he refused to acknowledge.

"Ugh." The first thing the fisherman did was tug at his bow tie, repulsed by the substance that stained it. "I knew this was a mistake."

Perhaps it was the wine's influence—though he did quickly wipe it away—for just a fleeting second, Fred couldn't hold back a flushed grin of raw contentment. Finally, here was the real Fingerhead, not the jovial masquerade Mouthbottom had him parade around.

"Why have you been avoiding me?" Fred cut right to the chase, extending his form assertively, though it didn't come close to matching the height of the taller alien.

Fingerhead seemed to find sudden interest in the edible shrapnel splattered across the floor. "Haven't been avoiding. Been Fishing."

"For three months straight?" Fred quivered with skepticism. "I'm sure you had time to answer a damn message."

Fingerhead stood his stubbornly silent ground. But Fred's special sense detected the turbulence beneath; discomfort floated on the surface, but deeper in the abyss lay fear. Fear of what, he couldn't say. The hero's expression softened despite himself.

"Look, I don't know what your issue is with me, and you don't have to say anything. But you've never had a problem telling me to leave you alone before."

The fisherman still didn't budge.

"Is... is it because of those stupid articles?" Fred crossed his arms, foot tapping an impatient rhythm against the concrete.

Fingerhead's tentacles flinched, finally showing a sign of life. "What articles?"

"Don't play dumb," Fred snapped, speech slipping into a slur. "The gossip. The photos. All the ridiculous speculation about us being..." He gestured ambiguously between them, unable to articulate what the tabloids had implied.

"You think I care what some brainless print says about me?"

"Oh, for the love of—cut the crap already!" Fred flung his arms, nearly losing his balance before wobbling back into Fingerhead's line of sight. "For once, can I just get a clear answer from you?"

Fingerhead arched his brow, studying the smaller alien up and down with the slight upturn of his lip. "You're drunk."

"No, I'm not! Stop trying to deflect!"

"Right... tell me, short stack, how many fingers am I holding up?"

"I'm not playing your—" Fred squinted, then held up four fingers of his own. "THIS many!"

"That would be impressive," Fingerhead drawled, "if I hadn't been holding zero fingers."

As Fred and Fingerhead stood fastened in their familiar dance of antagonism and emotional denial disguised as sarcasm, Sue and George watched utterly fascinated; completely oblivious to Bob's approach from the building behind them.

Bob stopped at the entrance of the garden, chest puffing up as he inhaled. The shame and fear that had consumed him moments ago transformed into a sacrificial resolve after the few self pep talks in the bathroom. It was time. No more hiding. No more lies.

He strode toward the chocolate fountain at the garden's center, each step determined and heavy. With a huff, he climbed onto the fountain's platform that encircled it, wobbling slightly before finding his balance.

Bob whistled, catching George and Sue's attention, along with other curious onlookers. Fred though, remained locked on Fingerhead and vice versa, their verbal sparring continuing unabated.

"Ahem!" Bob coughed.

"Your refusal to address the issue is childish!" Fred shouted.

"I know you are but what am I?" Fingerhead mockingly replied.

"AHEM!"

"—No hoo having crook!"

"Galactic boot-licker!"

Bob grumbled as he grabbed a nearby champagne flute and a spoon, clinking them aggressively together in rapid beats. The high-pitched rings finally seized the pair's bickering. Fred blinked, eyes painted with confusion when reality eventually settled around him.

"I..." Bob's voice cracked. All that built-up moxie sputtering now that every eye was on him. "I have something I need to say."

"Many of you know me as Captain Bob, the explorer who rescued the Galactic Superhero Siblings from—well, you've all heard the story. How I braved the underground stream, battled terrors out of legend, and retrieved George's..." he faltered, catching George's expectant grin. "Well. His arms."

The realization nearly slapped Fred out of his wine-induced stupor. This was happening—right now, in front of everyone. His pupils shrunk to pinpricks as he darted forward toward the platform. When he reached the base of the stone, he tugged frantically at Bob's pant leg, yanking with enough force to make the explorer stagger.

"Bob! What are you doing? Get down from there!" he spoke in a desperate hiss. "You don't need to do this now—not like this, in front of all these people!"

Bob glanced down briefly, his expression oddly serene despite Fred's frantic attempts to derail his confession. He simply shook his leg free and stepped away from the alien's reach.

"As I was saying," Bob continued, stronger now. "I've been carrying a secret that I can no longer bear. I didn't battle any squid monster. The truth is I lied to you all. I'm not the real hero of that story. I didn't find the arms on my own. I was just... there. At the right place. At the right time."

Sue materialized at Fred's side, her fingers digging into his arm in silent question. George lumbered through the parting crowd to join them, bits of hardened chocolate flaking off his curiously wrinkled features.

"If you think less of me, that's fine," Bob spoke louder over the murmuring party guests. "But I couldn't go a single day longer letting you all believe a myth. Especially not tonight, when I saw him." He reset the volume in his voice. "The one who brought my family back together."

Bob raised his chin, finding Fred, then George, Sue, even Happyman and Green Monster in the throng. His oldest friends now looked at him like strangers.

"The real hero—" he stopped, drew a breath, eyes settled not on his family, but on Fingerhead. "Was him."

All eyes followed where the explorer had pointed, searching for the alien in question. Fingerhead, who had been inching toward the nearest exit, halted in an imaginary spotlight as dozens of shocked faces found him simultaneously.

"I apologize to everyone, especially to George and to Old Fingerhead, who deserved recognition for his actions."

Fred looked over his siblings' reactions. Sue seemed strangely calm, clasping her hands together while gazing at the ground. George just floated there, his arms hanging limply at his sides. He looked at Bob, then at the fountain replica of Fingerhead above him. A slow, dawning understanding seemed to spark from within.

Guests turned to one another, exclaiming their surprise or whispering judgmentally behind cupped hands. Journalists who had evaded security scrambled to capture the moment, their recording devices whirring gluttonously.

Within seconds, reporters, dignitaries, and assorted celebrities had abandoned all decorum and surged toward the blue alien, who, with sweat beading on his upper temples, threw a wide glance at Fred in a silent, panicked call for help.

Fred moved to intervene but was jerked to the side by a wall of brash opportunists. One bulbous-eyed tabloidist leaned in with a device and snapped a flash photo inches from Fingerhead's face. In the brief instant of blindness that followed, some impulse—perhaps evolutionary, perhaps the result of too many years of hiding—took over.

The hero watched as Fingerhead's expression morphed into the unmistakable panic of someone experiencing sensory overload. His chest heaved rapidly as the crowd closed in, their praises and questions blending into an incomprehensible roar.

"George!" Fred barked up to his brother, who had floated above the commotion. "Handle this crowd!"

George blinked twice before understanding clicked into place. He pivoted immediately, herding the guests away from the fisherman like the sheep they were.

Fred lost sight of Fingerhead in the swirl of excitement, but he knew where the fisherman would bolt—toward the nearest exit. He pushed through the remaining guests, holding his breath as he squeezed through the gaps between bodies.

"Fin, wait!" Fred called, sprinting across the open space once he reached it, leaving everyone else behind.

Across the stony promenade, Fred chased Fingerhead at the far edge of the headquarters rotunda. The corridors they passed twisted in impossible geometries; looping Mobius stairs, fractal archways, and convection tunnels built for architectural display rather than function. The dock that held Fingerhead's ship was only a few steps away.

Fingerhead stopped, but only because he needed to catch his breath. His shoulders heaved, hands pressed against his chest—a universal sign of someone recovering from a panic attack.

He looked like a fish that had just been hooked, and the line was being reeled in.

"You okay?" Fred wheezed. He had slowed to a stop beside him, drawing in his own ragged breath.

"Peachy," Fingerhead rasped without turning. "Just *peachy*."

Fred waited, giving the fisherman space. The muted sounds of the gala filtered through the twisting halls behind them, a distant reminder of what they'd escaped. When Fingerhead's breathing finally balanced out, the hero took a cautious step forward.

"Listen, what you did for George..." he began, the words feeling foreign in his mouth. Expressing genuine admiration had never been his strong suit. "For all of us... without any recognition..."

Fingerhead slowly turned, his hardened expression softening just enough. That's when Fred saw it. A tiny red dot illuminating the fisherman's forehead.

The universe slowed. Fred's special sense screamed a high-pitched warning—pure, undiluted danger. He didn't think. He reacted.

"GET DOWN!" Fred lunged forward, his body colliding violently with Fingerhead's.

They hit the concrete with a clash of grunts. Not even a split second later did a beam of crimson energy sizzle through the space where Fingerhead's head had been, blasting a smoking, molten hole in the hull of his nearby ship.

Fingerhead blinked at the damage, still reeling from the shock of the tackle. When he processed the sound and the acrid smell of scorched metal, it was as if the shot had made its mark on him after all.

"MY SHIP!" he yelped. The attack was secondary. The violation of his vessel was a personal affront of the highest order.

Fred rolled off him into a defensive crouch, his vision sharpening as he scanned the shadowy maintenance area where the shot had originated. His fanged maw twitched with protective fury when he detected movement in the darkness.

"Stay here," he commanded, but Fingerhead had already scrambled aboard his vessel, engines firing up seconds later.

Fred had no time to stop him. He sprinted toward the maintenance area, leaping through a decorative bush into a lush tropical themed venue separated from the other service facilities.

Here, giant plants cast tangled shadows across the path—perfect hiding spots for an assailant. Fred pushed his special sense outward like a searchlight, filtering through the heavy scent of soil and the buzz of alcohol in his system.

A rustling to his left sent him diving behind a fern-like plant. Through the fronds, he glimpsed a dark figure daftly weaving between the foliage ahead.

Fred gave chase again, his short legs pumping across the lawn in discordant strides. He was a terrible runner, his body built for bureaucratic maneuvering, not athletic pursuit, but adrenaline was a powerful motivator.

He skidded to a dizzying surrender in a small clearing, his lungs burning as he doubled over in exhaustion. The assassin had vanished, melted into the shadows like they were never there at all.

"Darn it," he breathed, then straightened with the realization: Fingerhead was gone, escaped into deep space—and with him, any chance of understanding what the hell had just happened.

"Guys, he's over here!" A voice blared from above. George's.

Footsteps approached rapidly. Fred spun around to find Sue and Bob hurrying toward him with George floating down beside them, concern and confusion shared mutually across their faces.

"Fred!" Sue called, gathering her flowing dress to move faster. "What happened? We heard shouting."

Her winded brother leaned forward, hands on weakened knees, cursing himself for skipping fitness training. The evening's drinks weren't helping either.

"Someone just tried to kill Fingerhead."

Sue's hand flew to her mouth. George's limbs went slack as his feet touched the ground. Bob hunched over, eyes darting around the area for any hidden threats.

"Did they get far? I'll go and take a look from above!" George shot skyward before anyone could object.

"Where is he now?" Bob asked, stepping into Fred's blurry vision.

Fred shook his head, motioning toward the stars bitterly. "Gone. Took off in his ship the moment the shot was fired."

"But why target Fingerhead?" Sue wondered aloud. "He's just a fisherman."

"A fisherman who saved George's arms," Fred corrected, shooting Bob a pointed look, who had the decency to look ashamed. "A fisherman with a troubled past he probably thought he could keep buried until tonight."

"You think he knew someone was after him?" Bob rubbed his neck.

"I don't know. But I intend to find out."

George landed with a thud beside them. "No sign of anyone suspicious. We should tell security—"

"No," Fred cut him off with a raised paw. "We... we need to handle this ourselves. They managed to bypass personnel somehow. Until we know who's behind this, we can't trust anyone."

Bob spread out his hands. "So what should we do? This isn't exactly in my skill set."

"I'll search the perimeter and make sure the threat's been neutralized. Then, we get the hell out of here and make a plan."

Sue nodded, instantly falling into the familiar rhythm of crisis management. "I'll make our excuses to the Caterpillar Minister. Food poisoning should suffice."

"I'll keep our ship safe and ready," George added.

Fred turned to his brother-in-law, who stood awkwardly shifting his weight. "Bob—"

"Don't worry. I'll stay out of the way."

"Actually," Fred said, raising his snout, "I need you to gather intelligence. Find out if anyone saw something unusual. A nosy journalist, perhaps."

Bob smiled faintly, confidence replacing the guilt temporarily. "I can do that."

"Good. We'll rendezvous at our ship in twenty minutes. Now go, all of you."

As they dispersed, Fred noticed the dejection in Bob's shoulders when George flew away without acknowledging him. Sue sympathetically grabbed his hand and guided him inside the building, whispering words of reassurance.

A strange ping of pity surfaced, but Fred pushed it aside. His priority now was Fingerhead—finding out who had tried to kill him and why.

A traitor. A conspiracy. An attempted murder. And the only person who might have answers was the most infuriating, uncooperative, and pathologically cynical being he'd ever had the misfortune of actually caring about.

Chapter End Notes

THE STORY OFFICIALLY BEGINS.

This chapter and everything before basically serves as an intro/setup. Starting in the next chapter we get to the actual story and stakes...

Chapter 5: Residue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"*CONNECTING... CONNECTING...*"

The console interface blinked mockingly with its perpetual "*CONNECTING...*" message. Amber light from the triple-screen terminal mixed with the late morning ambiance of the Galactic Friends' ship living quarters.

Fred paced the length of the main console, wearing an invisible path into the floor. The metal, designed to minimize sound, absorbed his footfalls—but nothing could muffle the stream of colorful curses behind his teeth. Every third rotation, he stopped at the terminal, jabbing the keyboard as if punishing it for its silence.

"Come on, answer me you big dumb... stupid—FOOL!"

The connection dropped with a chirp that managed to sound both apologetic and smug. Fred slammed his palm against the panel, earning nothing but a dull ache in his hand and the same infuriating message reappearing on screen.

Star charts and blueprints of the Gala were tacked to the wall nearby, annotated with Fred's increasingly doctor-grade handwriting. Coffee-stained rings on the central command table marked evidence of a night spent chasing theories instead of sleep.

He turned to scan the living quarters where Sue and George sat quietly watching a debate that made Bob's confession their juicy topic of the day. Both siblings wore the expressions of pupils being lectured by the elders who expected better of them.

"Idiot thinks he can hide from me," Fred growled, caring little of the televised criticism. "Ignore my calls all you want, *Fin*. I'll find you eventually."

"You should take a break," Sue's sighed from the couch, sitting with perfect posture despite her own unease. "He could be out of range, you know."

George sprawled across the floor cushions, all arms splayed in different directions as he stared at the television upside down. "Maybe he's sleeping," he offered helpfully.

"It's been two days." Fred's tone flatlined. "Two. Days. Nobody sleeps that long, George. Not even you."

"And what about Bob?" Sue began. "He *still* won't get out of bed. Hasn't even spoken to me. I'm really starting to worry."

George sat up. "Maybe we should check on him?" he suggested, frowning with anxiety. "He seemed really upset after what happened. I could bring him breakfast? Or maybe a hug?"

"He's *fine*," Fred snapped, regretting his harshness but too wound up to apologize. "He just needs time."

Sue's lips pressed into a line of disapproval. George's shoulders had slumped visibly at Fred's dismissal.

"You think it's because of my arms?" George asked, holding himself while side-eyeing the debate on screen. "I told him I forgive him, but..."

Speak of the devil. That was the phrase that came to Fred's mind when Bob rounded the corner into the room, drawing everyone's attention. The songstress immediately grabbed the remote to power off the television when she saw her husband emerge.

"Morning everyone! Beautiful day in space, isn't it?" Bob announced, his smile stretching as he practically marched forward.

Fred's special sense scanned the emotional currents that should have accompanied such apparent joy. Instead, he found nothing—a void where feelings should be.

"Babe—hey," Sue arose breathily, gesturing Bob to sit next to her.

"Hello, my beautiful wife!" Bob walked to the couch as if pre-programmed, plopping down carelessly.

Sue huddled against him, gazing up from her lower position. "How are you feeling?" she asked carefully, but Bob's response was to lift her chin, planting a long and loving kiss that effectively silenced her question.

Fred watched the interaction with narrowed eyes, detecting Sue's concern shift to an unsteady acceptance. She wouldn't push, not now, not when Bob was clearly holding himself together with nothing but a plastered-on smile.

Bob stretched exaggeratedly, one arm wrapping around Sue's shoulders, the other clutching the remote control. With a casual flick of his wrist, he activated the television.

The screen came to life, revealing a forum of well-dressed commentators seated around a semicircular table. Behind them played footage of Bob at the Gala. Fred expected this to break the human, but the glue that held him together seemed to keep its hold. For now.

"—what this means for the credibility of the Galactic Friends moving forward," a stern-faced analyst was saying. "If one of their associates could perpetuate such a deception for so long —"

"Precisely. If he lied about the arms, what else has Captain Bob fabricated?"

Sue's hand lunged for the remote. "You don't need to watch this."

"It's fine, really." Bob's grip remained firm and out of reach. "I want to know what they're saying."

Fred noticed George's worried face from across the room. The gentle giant sank into a fort of pillows that wrapped around him in a self-soothing enclosure.

On screen, the discussion continued mercilessly. Bob stared unblinkingly at his own public humiliation, his true emotions shielded behind something unreadable to all but Fred.

Then, overly-animated buzz words flashed obnoxiously across the screen. The debate panel vanished, replaced by a horribly familiar smile. Shining Star Finder. Fred scowled instinctively as the man leaned toward the camera with perfect teeth gleaming.

"Thank you for joining us, my dear viewers. Today, we bring an exclusive interview by yours truly!" Star Finder giggled. "One I'm sure many of you will find... most interesting."

Sue buried herself into her husband's neck, muttering something unkind. Bob gave her a reassuring caress through her hair, remaining distant to it all.

"Following Captain Bob's shocking confession at the Galactic Gala, I went out of my way to locate the *parents* of the explorer, who have agreed to share their perspective on things."

Bob jolted upright on the couch, his face draining of every color except pink. "My... parents?"

The screen split to reveal two middle-aged humans seated in a modest Earth dwelling. The remote slipped from Bob's suddenly limp fingers, clattering to the floor.

"As you know, your son made an appearance on my show. The betrayal I feel is... ***indescribable!***" Star Finder sniffed faux distress, then resumed smiling. "How did you feel when you learned about your son's *disgusting* lie?"

The woman dabbed at dry eyes with a handkerchief. "We were devastated, naturally. We raised our Bobby to be honest. To think he would mislead the entire galaxy like this..."

"It broke our hearts," the man added, placing a supportive hand on his wife's shoulder. "But we weren't entirely surprised. Our son has always had a... vivid imagination. Always reaching for the stars. Of course, we encouraged his ambitions. That's what parents do."

"Robert's career took him so far from home. We understood his need for independence... but, we still love and miss him dearly," the woman added.

"How come we've never met your parents, Bob?" George asked innocently, popping out of his fort with a pillow resting on top of his head.

"Not now, George," Fred scolded quietly.

Fred stepped away from the communication console, Fingerhead temporarily forgotten as he processed it all. He rendered something profoundly wrong about Bob's emotional state—not just embarrassment or shame, but a deep, visceral pain of old wounds reopened.

"But this... this doesn't make sense," Sue whispered. "Bob? How is this...?"

Bob seemed beyond hearing, transfixed by the figures on the screen who continued to speak about him with a familiarity that felt increasingly jarring against his reaction.

Sue's hand found his. "You told me your parents were *dead*," she croaked just out of George's hearing range.

"They might as well have been."

Sue stared at him in shock, waiting for an explanation that never came. She had never seen such hatred so comprehensively mapped on her husband's face before.

"What?" Bob spoke coldly. "It's not like I never reached out. Heck—they didn't even come to our wedding." He spat a bitter laugh. "I sent the invitation out of... I don't know. Hope, maybe? They never responded."

George floated in front of the screen, hovering a hand near it. "But they seem so nice..."

"They seem like a lot of things," Bob replied, still staring ahead. "Caring. Supportive. *Present*." Each word dropped harder than the last. "They're very good at *seeming*."

A tear welled in the corner of Bob's eye, but he caught it with a swift brush of his thumb before it could betray him further. The vulnerable moment evaporated as quickly as it had appeared.

Sue wasn't convinced. She curled closer to him, silently communicating it was okay to be upset. It was no use.

"It doesn't matter," Bob muttered, adjusting his position to better accommodate his wife's embrace. "All in the past. What matters is finding Old Fingerhead. That's what I should focus on. Making things right."

Fred squinted suspiciously, but he said nothing, allowing Bob this small dignity. Though everyone saw right through the transparent deflection, none of them challenged it. Some things were too raw to probe, even with the best intentions.

A sudden, urgent beeping came from the communication console. All four heads twisted toward the sound and Fred went for it instantly.

"Fingerhead!?" Fred's paws mashed the keyboard, stopping himself from spamming the accept button.

Instead of the fisherman, a small floating figure materialized onscreen; a Hoo Hoo with a blue tear-shaped head, trembling visibly. The small alien's mouth formed frantic circles as it gestured urgently at the camera, its musical language coming through in panicked melodies.

"H-hoo," it sang. "Hoo hoo!"

"Sue?" Fred called, beckoning his sister over. "Can you translate this, please!?"

Sue stepped forward, her brow furrowing in concentration as she studied the creature's sounds. "It's a warning," she surmised. "Something about... oh dear."

The Hoo Hoo's gestures became more erratic, its bulging eyes widening impossibly further.

"The hunter has become the hunted," Sue translated, growing increasingly troubled. "You must save the child. Old Fingerhead is—"

The screen warped and distorted before the transmission cut off abruptly, leaving them staring at a blank screen. Fred stared back at himself, then slammed his fist against the keys. Alas, it didn't bring the creature back.

"Child?" Bob echoed from the couch. "What child?"

"I don't know. Damn, that's not enough to go on!" Fred replied, laying his forehead on the keyboard in defeat.

Bob tilted his head, pondering. "Can we trace the signal?"

Fred's head shot up. "Yes, right." His paws danced across the keys, then froze when a message appeared. "The signal is heavily encrypted..."

A silence took over, but it was only a beat before Fred was back to it, his determination steering all further actions while his family turned back to the living area. Soon the ship's automatic lighting system dimmed, transitioning from daytime brightness to the softer hues of simulated night.

The television played a classic adventure movie; one Bob would watch enthusiastically. Not this time. He remained in his spot under a blanket with a sleepy Sue. His eyes, though pointed in the direction of the television, seemed focused on something far beyond the screen.

The coffee table had disappeared beneath a sea of physical documents. Fred believed in the tangibility of evidence he could touch, spread out, and connect with threads if necessary. Charts with red circles marking Fingerhead's known locations over the past six months lay beside security reports detailing suspicious activity in those same regions.

George's spot on the floor cushions was empty, the pink alien having quietly retired to his quarters sometime during Fred's deep dive into the research. Sue had shifted positions on the couch, using Bob's legs as a head-rest.

Back and forth across the room, Fred strode as time passed, hands clasped behind his back. He paused occasionally to examine a document before resuming his circuit, appearance becoming more and more disheveled.

Eventually the couch held only Bob, Sue excused herself to bed after pressing an inviting kiss on her husband's forehead, but Bob declined her offer. He hadn't moved since the interview with his parents hours earlier. The television now played footage from the Gala on a continuous loop.

With each rewatch, more documents lay scattered across every surface around Bob. In the center of it all stood Fred himself, shoulders slumped in defeat, the symbols and coordinates blurred together. Exhaustion finally caught up with him.

The ship's chronometer displayed the late hour in fuzzy numerals. Fred had pursued every lead, explored every theory, and come no closer to understanding who was hunting Fingerhead or why.

With a heavy sigh, Fred gathered a few key documents and headed toward his quarters. At the hallway, he paused, looking back at Bob before leaving with his head hung low.

In his bed, Fred stared up at the darkness. Sleep eluded him despite being spent. Every time he dazed off, he saw Fingerhead's face, the moment before the assassin's shot nearly found it.

He rolled onto his side, then his back, then his other side, tangling himself in the thin standard-issue sheets. "Pointless," he mumbled, sitting up with a frustrated groan.

His quarters were spartan—a bed, a small desk, a locker for his uniforms, and nothing decorative save for a single framed photo of him with Sue and George as children. No personal touches, nothing frivolous. Just like him.

Fred pushed himself to his feet with a grunt and padded toward the door. Perhaps a glass of water and another look at the star charts would help settle his mind.

As he approached the living area, he could hear the faint sound of the television. Obviously, he wasn't the only one suffering from insomnia tonight. The audio grew clearer with each step—more coverage of the Gala, from the sound of it.

But there was something else: a strange, sweet-yet-pungent odor wafting through the air. Fred's sensitive nose wrinkled. The scent was herbal, earthy, with an acrid undertone.

Fred slowed his approach, stopping at the entrance. In the light, he could make out Bob's silhouette, still seated where he had left him. The explorer's posture had changed, though; he was slumped lower, his head tilted back against the cushions.

Stepping into the room, Fred observed him closer. The human hadn't noticed him yet. His half-lidded eyes, fixed on the ceiling rather than the screen. Between his fingers, a small rolled paper glowed orange at its tip, sending lazy tendrils of smoke spiraling upward.

Fred coughed.

The effect was immediate and catastrophic. Bob jolted as if electrocuted, blood-shot eyes flying wide open. He let out a strangled yelp, the still-burning joint slipping from his fragile grip.

"Fred! I—I didn't—" Bob stammered, frantically patting the couch cushions in search of the dropped contraband.

Finding it, he grabbed it and, in his panic, shoved it under a linen throw—a decision his brain immediately recognized as terrible. Bob stared in horror as a thin wisp of smoke began rising

from beneath the flammable fabric.

"Oh sh—oh geez-oh-n-no—"

Fred lunged forward just as the smoke appeared, grabbing the blanket and yanking it away from the couch. Thinking quick, he patted out the area, smothering it before flames could grow.

With the danger neutralized, Fred stood holding the singed throw, a charred spot marking where the joint had been. Bob just sat there, face flushed with mortification, reminiscent of a teenager caught red-handed.

In the silence, Fred calmly folded the blanket to hide the burn while Bob stared at his own hands as if they belonged to someone else.

"I don't usually—" Bob swallowed. "I mean, I knew Sue had some and I just—I couldn't sleep and—"

Fred reached for the remote and pressed the power button. "I couldn't sleep either." he sighed, gentler than Bob had ever heard him as he sat down.

In the darkness, both men were a cushion apart, stiff and avoidant of each other's gaze. It felt like decades of silence before Bob decided he should be the one to speak first.

"Do you want to know the worst part?" he whispered. "When I saw them on that screen, for just a split second, I was happy. After everything, some stupid part of me still wanted to see them."

Fred was silent, sensing that Bob needed to speak more than he needed a response.

"They never came to a single school event," Bob resumed. "Not one science fair or graduation. The house was always... empty. When they kicked me out at seventeen? It was the most attention I've ever gotten."

"I remember the time I told them I'd been accepted to the Space Academy, do you know what my father said? *'That's nice, Robert. Could you pass the salt?'*"

Fred looked to his right, trying to hide his awkward, wincing expression.

"Dad was right about my ambition though. I spent my whole childhood trying to make them notice me. To make anyone notice me." Bob ran a hand through his tangled hair. "I guess some habits die hard."

"Bob..." Fred stopped him before he went on. Something struck him in an unexpected place. For years, he'd seen Bob as nothing more than an opportunist who'd taken advantage of his family's tragedy for personal gain.

"I'm sorry. I can't speak for your parents—but... they should be proud of you. I know I would be."

The unexpected kindness seemed to hit Bob harder than any accusation could. His carefully constructed facade—the last remnants of Captain Bob, Explorer Extraordinaire—crumbled entirely.

Bob's lower lip trembled. He wiped his face with a sleeve, but it didn't stop the tears from flowing freely. His shoulders shook with suppressed sobs as he leaned forward, pressing his palms against his eyes.

The wary alien scooted closer, uncertain how to respond to this raw display. Physical comfort was George's department. Fred's instinct was to retreat, to give Bob privacy for his breakdown.

In the end, he decided to not overthink it, choosing instead to pull Bob in willingly. The human immediately collapsed against the arms that held him.

Fred cautiously patted Bob's back. "There... there," he managed, sounding ridiculous. Gradually though, his pats became a more natural, supportive embrace.

"They never cared," Bob hiccupped in Fred's suit. "And now they show up to cash in on my humiliation—years of not knowing if I was even alive, and suddenly they're experts on my childhood?! Well, SCREW THEM!"

"I know." Fred squeezed tighter. "I know."

Fred found himself sinking deeper onto the couch under Bob's weight. The feeling was strange but not unpleasant. He gazed upwards, considering his next words.

"You know," Fred started slowly, "my childhood wasn't exactly conventional either."

Bob's breathing became quiet.

"Before the Galactic Friends, before the superhero stuff... I was just another orphan. My parents died in a fish attack when I was an infant. Don't remember much about them, to be honest."

Bob pulled back, wiping his widening puffy eyes. "Is that why you hate fish so much?"

The overly earnest sounding question reminded Fred of Bob's intoxication. "Yes," he snickered.

Bob fell limp against him. "That's horrible. I'm sorry," he sniffed. "What was the orphanage like?"

"The orphanage was... efficient. Kept us alive, educated us, trained us. There wasn't much in the way of warmth. But... that's where I met Sue and George. We weren't related by blood, but the Family Bonding Program paired us together. Thought we'd be a good match, I guess."

"They were right. Sue and George are lucky to have you."

Fred snorted. "I'm not sure they'd agree with that assessment."

"No, they are," Bob's voice scratched. "You'd do anything for them."

"Well. When you've lost everything once, you get pretty determined not to let it happen again."

Bob hesitated, then added, "I really do love her, you know. I'm not... it was never an act."

"I know. And... for what it's worth," Fred sighed, "those people calling themselves your family? They're not. We are." He motioned around the ship, then chuckled. "Even if some of us have a funny way of showing it."

Bob blinked, a fresh tear trailing down his cheek. "Fred—"

"Don't make it weird," Fred cut him off. "And if you tell anyone I said that, I'll deny it."

A small, watery smile appeared on Bob's face. "Understood."

They sat in a more comfortable silence now. Bob's body relaxed as the minutes passed, head becoming heavy on the other's rising and falling chest.

"I should..." Bob slurred, making a half-hearted attempt to sit up.

"It's fine," Fred croaked. "We both need sleep, and I'm too tired to move anyway."

Bob nodded, already drifting off. Fred made himself snug, resigned to spending the night trapped on the couch underneath the man he thought he hated.

Chapter End Notes

BOB! SMOKING DA DOOBS?? Headcanon: Sue is a pothead with a secret stash.
Lmaoooo

So I gave a lot of character development in this chapter like omg I think it's my favorite one so far!

Also Star Finder is so frugging VINDICTIVE. Like what is his problem with Bob?? But yeah, That's not the only thing needing answers...

Chapter 6: For Hoom the Bell Tolls

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Morning had a way of exposing uncomfortable truths, and this particular dawn was determined to reveal Fred's most closely guarded secret: he could, apparently, be used as a pillow.

As Fred and Bob slept, Sue serenely waltzed through the corridor, emerging from her quarters with a yawning stretch and sleep-tousled hair. Being an early bird, the ship's automatic systems were just beginning to transition from its simulated night cycle.

She'd chosen comfort over style this morning, wearing a torn oversized jersey she refused to throw away. She recalled how Fred had once insulted it, comparing her to a messy hobo. The memory made her smile as she rounded the corner into the main room.

When she entered, her smile was slapped right off her face. The songstress's heels skidded to a squeaking halt. She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, blinking several times to fully grasp the scene before her.

There on the couch, in defiance of all natural laws and reasonable expectations, lay her brother, and sprawled across him like a contented cat was her husband. For a long while, Sue stood transfixed. Then, her expression turned from shock to a beam of pure mischief.

With needless exaggeration, she tiptoed closer, her hand slipping into a pocket to retrieve her smart phone. She held her breath when Bob tossed and turned before messily settling again. Fred stayed motionless, his normally tense features softened in slumber.

The camera app opened with a soft tap of her thumb that seemed thunderous in the quiet room. Sue raised the phone, framing the perfect shot of this unprecedented moment, and pressed the capture button.

She forgot to turn off the flash.

Fred's eyes snapped open as if waking from a nightmare, pupils contracting against the sudden brilliance as awareness swam dizzily around him.

Bob, by contrast, barely acknowledged the intrusion. His eyelids fluttered briefly before he made a small whiny sound and burrowed his face deeper into Fred's shirt, arms tightening in pout over his brother-in-law's waist.

Boiling heat rushed to Fred's cheeks, spreading to the tips of his head-nubs when he registered both his compromising position and Sue's guilty grin.

"Delete that," he hissed through tightly knitted lips.

Casually, Sue pocketed the phone. "Good morning," she purred, turning toward the kitchen area with an innocent swing in her step.

The coffee maker activated shortly after with its tranquil burbling overlaid by Sue's contented humming, sounding dubiously more like a lullaby the longer Fred listened.

And so he remained there, muscles tensing with desire to leap from the couch before forcing them to relax, preserving rest for the man who had cried himself to exhaustion just hours ago. His glare tracked Sue's every movement, promising retribution that they both knew would never come.

"Sue," Fred warned, the single utterance carrying a wealth of threats. "I'm not kidding."

"Would you like some coffee?" Sue peaked over the counter, fluttering her eyelashes.

The scowl on her brother's face deepened, but any retort died on his tongue when Bob stirred against him again, mumbling something about "the guy from last weekend" and having to "ban a griever". Whatever that meant.

Sue approached, looking over her husband with a dreamy gaze. "He looks so peaceful. Thank you, Fred."

Left with no viable escape and his anger deflating under Sue's sincere gratitude, Fred resigned a sigh. "Just make sure George doesn't see it," he muttered, a final, token protest.

Sue grinned into her coffee cup, taking a wise sip before answering. "You know I can't promise that."

She sank into a nearby recliner, picking up an abandoned throw. When she spotted the small black mark and blunt remnants on the floor however, she shot Fred a questioning glare. Her brother instantly pointed at Bob, wordlessly snitching on her husband's thievery.

It was Fred's turn to smile then.

Hours later, the morning calm gave way to mid-morning purpose. Fred stood beside Bob near the ship's exit, both men transformed from their earlier sleepy state. Fred wore a fresh uniform, while Bob had donned his explorer gear.

Whilst listening to Fred's brainstorming on how they were to find Fingerhead, Bob caught his own reflection in the ship's walls. He frowned at himself and adjusted his jacket, then leaned toward a nearby map with a focus that strained his features.

"Lately, more of these mini 'black hole' anomalies have been popping up around the galaxy." Bob pointed to a cluster of circles near the nebula's edge. "They could mask a ship's presence, especially if someone's trying to hide."

Fred nodded, actually impressed. "Good catch. That's why we'll need to divide our responsibilities." He tapped the radar scanner in his hand, its surface chirping readily. "You'll track these energy oddities while I scan for emotional disturbances."

"Emotional disturbances, huh?" Bob squinted. "And you'll know it's him?"

"My special sense works at a distance, but it's clearer with beings I'm familiar with," Fred adjusted the scanner's settings. "If Fingerhead is anywhere near these things—I should be able to detect it."

"Well, alright then. Let's do this."

They moved in hurried synchrony, checking equipment, confirming coordinates, and gathering any additional gear they might need. Fred strapped a utility belt to his hip while Bob stuffed a compact medical kit inside a satchel. Sue and George would maintain the ship in orbit, ready for immediate extraction if necessary.

They stopped before the exit, and the overhead lights switched into departure mode.

"Ready?" Fred asked while triple checking their gear.

"Ready." Bob nodded.

"Okay, go ahead and open the door. I'll get the keys to the cruiser."

Bob happily saluted, his backpack jingling as he bounced to the control panel. After punching a sequence of numbers, he poised his finger dramatically for the final button press.

BANG, BANG, BANG.

A sudden banging reverberated through the metal in a desperate, pounding rhythm that sent chilling vibrations up Bob's now paralyzed arm. He barely registered it before Fred appeared and harshly shoved him aside.

"It's him!" Fred rushed to activate the door the instant he recognized the jagged emotional signature on the other side.

The door slid open. What stood there barely resembled the fisherman they knew. He was hunched, swaying, with eyes sunken into hollowing pits. Tattered clothing revealed dozens of bleeding abrasions across his ghostly pale skin.

Fred and Bob stared in horror, their carefully planned search mission now rendered obsolete in this new terrifying revelation. Fingerhead opened his mouth, but there was no sound, only a puff of ash. His body simply gave out, knees buckling once he stepped forward.

Fred dashed to catch him. Though the weight dragged him down to one knee, he did manage to reflexively cradle the fisherman's back to prevent further injury before they both hit the floor.

Fingerhead's eyes rolled wildly before focusing fearfully on Fred's face. His mouth moved again, and this time came a ragged whisper.

"I need... your *help*."

The final word had barely made it out. The fisherman's eyes closed, body going limp in Fred's arms.

"Bob, quick! Get Sue!" Fred shouted, struggling to better support Fingerhead's deadweight. "Now!"

Bob buffered, taking only a second to snap out of his shock to sprint down the corridor. As the panicked calls for help echoed through the ship, Fred remained kneeling by the fisherman, powerlessly scanning the cuts and bruises.

"I tried to tell you," Fred muttered furiously under his breath, though his touch was timid whilst trying to curb the blood flow. "If you'd just *listened*..."

The hands that materialized beside Fred seemed to break the spell of reflection. Sue landed on her knees beside Fingerhead's prone form. After assessing the damage, she glanced anxiously at her brother.

There was much work to be done.

In the med-bay, time crawled. Fred stood at the head of the operating table, his suit flashed wild colors of anger—anger at whoever had done this, at Fingerhead for disappearing, at himself for not finding the fisherman sooner.

Once Sue finished her restoration song with the worst injuries having been addressed, Fingerhead sat up, though his weakened body was slow to rise.

"What were you thinking!?" Fred lunged forward, giving no time to breathe. "You really thought you could just run away from this? Do you have any idea how worried I—*we've* been!?"

"Sorry, didn't know you were my mother," Fingerhead shot back, harshly correcting the kink in his neck. A visible tremor ran through his frame as he stood up and leaned his back against the table, his defiance briefly undermined by his pained expression.

"No games this time," Fred pressed. "You vanish for days, show up half-dead, and expect us to just—"

"Mind your own business?" Fingerhead cracked his jaw and crossed his arms. "Novel concept for superheroes, I know."

Sue caught Bob's worried look from across the room. George was whispering something that made the explorer shrug uneasily.

"You came to us!" Fred pointed violently at Fingerhead. "Whatever's happening, you obviously can't handle it alone. Now tell me, who's after you?"

Fingerhead's fingers clenched the table edge. "It's complicated."

"You better uncomplicate it then, and do it fast. A Hoo Hoo gave us an urgent warning yesterday, mentioning *you* by name!"

"A Hoo Hoo? What... what did it say?"

"Something about a hunter and a child in need of saving." Fred puffed up, paws on his hip. "Ring any bells?"

Fingerhead's gaze skittered away, but his peripheral vision found George's shadow floating toward him.

"Um, Mr. Fingerhead..." George fidgeted. "W-why hasn't Mouthbottom said anything?"

The fisherman's hand moved unconsciously to the back of his head, fingers brushing the limp digits that usually housed his other half. "He... hasn't been around," he confessed slowly. "Not since the attack."

"What do you mean, 'hasn't been around'?" Sue jumped in, her healing instincts detecting something beyond physical injury. "Mouthbottom is part of you. He can't just disappear, can he?"

"Could the attack have damaged your neural pathways somehow?" Bob ventured.

"I have no clue," Fingerhead admitted, and the uncertainty in those four words sent a chill through the room.

"But... Mouthbottom's my best friend," George quivered. "He'll come back, won't he?"

Fingerhead lowered his head, offering no reassurance. Instead, he muttered, "she's not going to stop," so quietly Fred almost missed it.

"Who is she?" Fred snapped his fingers, unwilling to meet anymore silence. "Fingerhead. Who. Is. She?"

Fingerhead slowly scanned each face in the room, feeling pinned by their questioning stares and wanting nothing more than to disappear again. Unable to flee, he squirmed internally as survival instincts still urged him to fight until exhaustion finally won.

"She's my daughter."

The announcement had yanked all the air out of the med-bay.

Fred's jaw snapped shut, opened, then shut again. The idea of Old Fingerhead, infamous loner, criminal nuisance, and emotional dead zone, as anyone's father seemed to short-circuit the deepest levels of his ability to process reality.

"Impossible," Fred finally managed, though he didn't know why the word came out so adamantly.

"Not *really*," Fingerhead drawled, then placed a pondering finger against his chin. "I mean, statistically speaking, it's improbable it only happened once."

Fred tilted his head curiously, picking up on the fisherman's cheekiness before his expression even showed it. "How did this happen?"

A slow, wicked grin finally appeared on Fingerhead's face. Despite the aching in his bones, despite everything that had happened, he couldn't resist the opportunity that had just presented itself on a silver platter.

"Well, Fred," he stretched, leaning back further, "when two consenting adults love each other very much—or sometimes when they've had too much to drink—"

"That's not what I meant!" Fred threw up his paws, face flushing crimson.

"—they engage in a beautiful, natural process that involves certain... *anatomical arrangements*," Fingerhead continued, completely ignoring the interruption. "You see, there's this thing called reproduction, where genetic material is exchanged through intimate physical contact..."

Sue covered her mouth, both her and Bob hopelessly fighting back their giggles while George floated nearby with wide, innocent eyes, absorbing every word like it was a nature documentary.

"STOP," Fred practically shrieked, his head-nubs bending behind his skull. "I meant how did you end up with a murderous daughter!?"

"Oh, that. Much less interesting story, I'm afraid."

The fisherman's amusement faded bitterly, replaced by something darker. He reached into what remained of his tattered clothing and withdrew a custom, black plasma weapon.

"She tried to use this on me," he said, lazily setting it on the medical table where it gleamed under the examination lights. "Would have succeeded too, if she wasn't such a bad shot."

Fred confiscated it without hesitation. He examined the weapon with morbid fascination, noting the original parts hiding behind its many crude modifications.

"Tell me *everything*," Fred uttered, his determination stronger than ever. "Starting with your daughter. We have to know exactly who we're dealing with. The child the Hoo Hoo mentioned, is it possible they were referring to her?"

Fingerhead scoffed. "She's no damsel in distress, you can trust me on that." A gravely exhale left him and his eyes drooped closed. For a moment Fred thought he might have lost consciousness again until he held out a weak hand of protest. "Listen, I can't talk about it... not right now."

"What!?" Fred stomped, causing everyone to flinch. "You don't get to just—your daughter—you have a *daughter* who is trying to KILL you! We need to know why and we need to know now!"

Fingerhead's breathing had grown shallow. "Please," he mumbled out the word, sounding so uncharacteristically defeated that it hitched Fred's pacing momentarily. "Just give me a few hours. I'll tell you everything, but right now I can barely think straight."

"But—"

"Fred." Sue cut in, her tone understanding yet stern as she moved to Fred's side and placed a hand on his arm. "Look at him."

Fred reluctantly looked up, taking in the fisherman's full condition. The struggle to stay focused, shaking arms still clinging to the table behind him, the pallor that hadn't fully lifted despite Sue's healing efforts. This seemed to finally dull his sharp edges.

"Okay... okay, I'm sorry." Fred paused, taking a moment to think in the quiet. "You should rest. We'll discuss everything later, I suppose. In the meantime... you can use my quarters."

Fingerhead jerked upwards as if Fred had offered him something downright harmful. "Your what?"

"The bed's more comfortable than this medical table, and the couch isn't exactly private." Fred continued, ignoring the other's increasingly reclusive reaction.

Sue's jaw hung open. Fred offering his personal space—his sanctuary—was unprecedented. George looked just as stunned as she did.

Before Fingerhead could respond with a proper quip, Fred slid under his arm to help him walk. "I'm not arguing with you," he spewed.

"Here, let me help." Bob stepped forward, supporting Fingerhead's other side.

"Oh, *great*. Two for one special," Fingerhead droned.

As they shuffled together out of the med-bay, the trio formed an awkward convoy. Bob and Fred held onto Fingerhead as if carrying a casket rather than ushering a patient to bed.

The corridor was ruthlessly narrow. Fingerhead's shadow wasn't enough to cloak the warble of growing conflict in Fred's eyes. Each step deepened the line between his brows along with every pained wince from the fisherman; something Bob took notice of.

"You okay?" Bob looked at Fred from under their patient's chest.

Fred mumbled dismissively, but his jaw kept flexing against some internal argument. Fingerhead was a perpetual irritant in Fred's universe. Yet here he was, helping him, worried about the wellbeing of someone who should've been his enemy. It didn't make sense, no matter how he worded it in his mind.

Once inside Fred's quarters, the atmosphere made it feel more like an interrogation cell than an actual bedroom. Fingerhead would've said as much if he wasn't so tired. He leaned against the wall, noticing Bob hovering sheepishly near the doorway.

The explorer, still heavy with guilt, was now in close proximity to the alien he had stolen heroism from. He was far from prepared for this moment.

"Right, so, uh..." Bob started backing away. "I should check on the ship's systems. Make sure everything's good and... *shippy*." His eyes darted between Fred and Fingerhead. Then he was gone.

The door slid shut, leaving the hero alone with a mildly confused fisherman. An uncomfortable silence settled and Fred stood in the middle of it, suddenly conscious of how small his room felt.

"Well," Fred began with a fake stretch. "This is where I sleep. It's, uh, not much to look at," he admitted, his voice squeaking quieter now.

"It's very you-coated," Fingerhead said flatly as he limped his way to the bed.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what you think it means." Fingerhead lowered himself onto the bed's edge with a groan. The mattress dipped and creaked underneath him, and for a while he just sat there, taking in the colorless space. "But yeah, it's... thanks."

"You're welcome." Fred tugged at his collar. "Um, anyway, the bathroom's through there. Clean towels in the cabinet. And there's..." He trailed off, realizing he was talking to someone who probably didn't care about thread count.

"Okay—you know what, just answer me this," Fred blurted, unable to stop himself. "How long has it been? Since you've seen her? Your daughter, I mean."

Fingerhead sighed. "Long enough that I hoped she'd forgotten about me entirely."

"But she didn't."

"No." Fingerhead's voice deepened. "She didn't."

Fred clasped his clammy hands together, trying to be as delicate as possible. "So what hap—"

"Later," Fingerhead snapped. Without another word, he turned his back, escaping the outside world by burying himself in the sheets.

"Right—sorry. I'll let you rest, then. Maybe when you wake up, Mouthbottom will return."

A sardonic mumble was the only reply.

Fred sighed as he stepped into the corridor, but before he could close the door, another admission followed him, almost swallowed by the darkness.

"Her name is Allie, by the way."

Fred lingered for a few more seconds, when nothing else came, he nodded and closed the door with an appreciative click. He stood there longer than necessary, a paw wondering along the metal surface. Finally, he turned away—only to find he wasn't alone.

Fred gasped at the sight of his sister, clutching the fabric around his chest. "Sheesh!" he hissed, managing to shout in a whisper. "You nearly gave me a darn heart attack!"

Sue leaned against the main corridor wall, arms crossed, her face an sly portrait of curiosity. She'd tried and failed to suppress a grin as her brother practically sprinted past without acknowledging her any further.

"So," she started, matching his march to the main room, "that was unexpectedly generous of you."

Fred shrugged, gaze fixed ahead. "He needed somewhere simple and quiet. Not George's mess or assaulted by your overly floral decor taste."

"Oh, I see," Sue replied, her tone suggesting she saw right through him. "Your bed. Your sacred space. The one you won't even let George use during nightmares because it's *superior*?"

"It's just a bed, Sue."

"But it's *your* bed!" She stopped walking, forcing him to face her. "What's really going on here?"

Fred swallowed something bitter, hands clasping behind his back in a effort to appear unbothered. "I'm simply repaying a favor."

"What kind of favor?"

"He let me sleep in his bed before." The words came out a little too defensively, his eyes rolling when Sue's eyebrows shot up.

"He what now?" Sue's voice pitched lower. "When did you sleep in Fingerhead's bed? How long has this been a thing!?"

Fred huffed. "It was never a thing! We were both drunk at the time, and—"

"Drunk?" Sue's smirk widened. "Oh my, this just keeps getting better."

"Sue—"

"And you slept in his bed. Together?" She bounced on her toes, delighted by this revelation.

"NOT together!" Fred squeaked. "I passed out on his floor. I assume he helped me into his bed because I woke up in it. End of story."

"Oh my gosh! So he *carried* you to bed!" Sue clapped in excitement, then her arms went limp with affection. "Oh, Fred. And all the times you scolded me for seeking fairy tale romance..."

"What th—d-don't..." he stuttered, then collected himself with a deep breath. "Don't make this into something it's not."

"I'm not making it into anything," Sue prodded. "Just observing what's already there."

"He's exhausted and going through a crisis. I'm helping. That's all! We're not friends—we're not anything! Besides, he's already made it very clear how he feels."

When he looked down, Sue seemed to understand; taking in his defensive posture, clenching fist, and lingering blush. She could only tease him for so long before it was no longer fun.

"Okay," she surrendered. "If you say so."

"That I do." Fred nodded, continuing down the corridor. But as he walked, Sue's words followed him like an echo.

The problem was, he wasn't sure he'd ever be ready to examine his own true feelings on the matter of his friendship with Fingerhead. A friendship, that had been undoubtedly growing stronger with each ridiculous encounter.

Behind the door they were leaving behind—now under *his* protection—was an alien of a thousand mysteries. But for the first time ever, Fred felt like the day would come where he might actually have a chance at getting some answers. Both from the fisherman, and from himself.

Chapter End Notes

Headcanon: Sue has an AO3 account.

Anywhoo, yeah, Fingerhead's gotta killer daughter. I know OCs in fanfiction probably aren't popular, but I promise to keep her role mostly as an obstacle/plot device for the main characters to bounce off of instead of it being a story about her—does that make sense??

I actually have a design for her somewhere on my tumblr, I may add the picture in the next chapter!

Also, POOR FRED JUST WANTS FRIENDSHIP but these old grumpy goobs can't admit they have feelings cus they'll explode I GUESS.

Chapter 7: Old Friends, New Enemies

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Allie. That was her name.

A simple inquiry into the Galactic Database would reveal everything they needed to know about Old Fingerhead's daughter, but access remained restricted to select Galactic Friend agents. Fortunately, Fred had connections, and if anyone could be trusted with sensitive information, it was Sneezy.

The team gathered around the central table that encircled the majority of the council room. The empty holographic terminal floating above them seemed to match the hollow expressions on everyone's face.

"Are you sure this is wise?" Sue's hands reached out to Fred's. "I trust Buck with my life, but how do we know he still has access to the database?"

"I know it's risky." Fred leaned over the table's metal surface. "But we're out of options."

"Couldn't we just wait until Fingerhead recovers enough to tell us more?" Bob held up a pointer finger. "Maybe he already knows everything we need."

Fred didn't turn, his gaze fixed on the sapphire light flickering across his retinas. "He's already told us all he intends to." No anger colored the words that scraped against his jaw, only a tired certainty.

"But Fred!" George raised two left hands. "What if he doesn't want to help us?"

"I have a backup plan if things get difficult. I just hope I don't have to use it..."

With a single button press, the terminal whirred with renewed life. Within seconds, a familiar face materialized in the glow—a muddy-colored snout and intelligent eyes that immediately brightened with recognition.

"Fred, old boy!" Sneezy's tail wagged so vigorously the transmission shook. "How absolutely wonderful to hear from you! I do hope you're faring well after that dreadful business at the Gala. Shame we didn't get to chat properly."

Fred nodded politely, though he rubbed the back of an antler, betraying a telling disquiet. "We're managing. How are things on your end, Buck?"

"Sneezy," the little alien corrected, "I go by Sneezy now, Fred."

"Right," Fred coughed. "I forget. Your mission surveying Little King John, is still ongoing, I assume?"

"I don't think of it as a mission, per se! I rather enjoy John's realm. You should hear about our progress—or better yet—come visit sometime!"

"That's—"

"I'm sure John would love to finally meet you all. It's just the two of us in this giant castle. All day." Sneezy gulped. "*Everyday*."

"We'll put a pin in that," Fred managed during Sneezy's brief pause. "But I need to talk about —"

"I've been meaning to speak with you myself." Sneezy's cheerful demeanor faltered as he strained to scratch behind his head with a stubby leg. "Friends have been working around the clock managing the fallout from that whole... well, Captain Bob's, er, *creative* storytelling."

From behind the projection, Bob shoulders slumped. The explorer who once commanded rooms with his charisma now physically shrank, trying to fold himself into nonexistence. Fred gritted his teeth but kept his expression neutral, not wanting Sneezy to see the impact of his casual remark.

"That's not why I called," Fred said evenly, deliberately businesslike.

Sue had noticed Bob's reaction too. She reached under the table for his hand, but he quickly retreated, burying his head in his arms against the hard, cold surface.

Sneezy's tail wagging ceased, and his expression grew serious. "Of course, my apologies for rambling. How can I assist?"

Fred drew in a deep breath, fully aware of the potential boundary he was about to cross. "I need access to the Galactic Database," he sputtered more quickly than intended. "Specifically, the classified section on citizens."

"Oh my. That's... quite restricted." Sneezy's tail curled protectively around his body. "May I ask what this is regarding?"

"It's—well, it's a private matter," Fred replied, slouching as his confidence fled. "Family related."

"Family?" Sneezy's brow furrowed with suspicion. "Fred, you know I'd help if I could, but there are protocols, you see."

"I'm well versed," Fred cut in sharply. Then, realizing his approach wasn't working, remembered Sneezy's long-standing idolization for him. A fact he'd always pretended not to notice, but now would prove useful.

Time to switch to plan B.

Fred leaned closer to the hologram, his elbow relaxing on the edge of the table. "Sneezy, I wouldn't ask this of just anyone." He tilted his head, meeting the agent's curious gaze. "Ever since we were fledglings in the academy, I've always been able to count on you, haven't I?"

Sneezy's mouth fell slightly open. "Y-yes, of course, but..."

Fred's smile widened with nauseous pride, a row of fingers tapping disorderly underneath him. "You know I've always admired your dedication. Your ability to guard secrets." He paused meaningfully. "Your loyalty."

George choked on air, his laughter stifled when Sue kicked his leg. Bob peered up from behind his arms dumbfounded at what he was potentially witnessing.

The agent's tail began wagging frantically of its own accord, basking in the praise of his idol. "I... suppose..." He swallowed a large lump. "I could send the appropriate codes..."

Fred flashed his teeth, throwing a wink that covered the unsettled twitch in his eye. "You're a lifesaver, Sneeze."

"Will you call me after? To let me know everything's alright?" Sneezy asked hopefully. "I've been busy with kingdom management and other quite stressful investigations—but I could always make time for you!"

Fred's finger stopped just short over the transmission button. He perked up with interest and threw up a paw to prevent Sneezy from jabbering further.

"Other investigations?"

Sneezy's eyes darted around nervously, as if checking for hidden eavesdroppers. "It's been a problem for quite sometime," he whispered. "But I've been tracking a disturbing pattern of Hoo Hoo disappearances, Fred."

Sue and George exchanged worried glances while Bob's head now rose with dawning lucidity.

"Got any leads?" Fred asked, his mind attempting to connect dots to the Hoo Hoo that contacted them.

"Several," Sneezy replied. "Ever since the invasion and exodus of Hooland, countless Hoo Hoos have come forward. Not one has been able to explain anything useful."

Bob inhaled something sharp, quietly recalling what had happened to Hooland—a place constructed from derelict spacecraft, once vibrant with Hoo Hoo culture, now silent and empty for years now.

"I believe there might be evidence hidden in those ruins. But..." Sneezy eyes became downcast. "Little King John requires constant assistance. The royal duties are endless, and I simply haven't had the time to mount a proper expedition."

"Thank you," Fred croaked with a glint of empathy in his eyes. "I'll let you know if we hear anything."

"Gotta go now, friends." Sneezy nodded gratefully. "And Fred? It was nice to see you..."

As soon as the transmission ended, Fred let out a breath he'd been holding for far too long. His fingers flew across the keyboard seconds later, inputting Sneezy's access code.

"Goodness, Fred." The tapping sounds of the keyboard stopped briefly at Sue's comment. "Never thought you were capable of using charm as a weapon."

"A necessary evil," Fred sighed.

The terminal's display changed to the Galactic Database's welcome screen; a vast repository of information on every known being in the galaxy. Minutes later it projected a holographic figure in the center of the room.

A female silhouette materialized particle by particle, with her physical profile sharpening into focus until she stood before the heroes in three-dimensional clarity.

Turquoise skin jittered in the virtual light, several shades brighter than Fingerhead's weathered blue. Her posture was military-straight, shoulders squared with a confidence that bordered on arrogance. Two finger-tentacles curved elegantly from the base of her skull, their tips a deeper blue than her father's.

Fred hitched, unable to blink at the image of Allie. Something about her eyes; a similar shaded hue as Fingerhead's, but colder, reflecting a deep insidious goal. It made him hesitate, wondering what the alien who saved his family could've possibly done to justify such a rage from his own blood.

He shook his head, pushing aside his doubts. Whatever had happened between Fingerhead and his daughter, Fred knew one thing with absolute solidity: the fisherman didn't deserve to die.

"The eyes," Fred muttered, manipulating the hologram to zoom in on her face. "Three instead of two. Most likely a trait from whoever her mother is."

Fred circled the hologram meticulously, his narrowed eyes turning grey as he cataloged details with professional detachment. The weapon strapped to her thigh was the same one he now held in his paw, with its matching distinctive engravings along the barrel.

Bob stood up and stepped several paces back, his gaze troubled as he stared at the projection. The intimidating hatred radiating from even this digital representation struck a familiar chord within him; that burn of parental disappointment he knew all too well.

"I've always thought my parents were total jerks," Bob whispered, "But I could never imagine..." He shook his head, unable to finish.

Sue studied Allie with her head tilted. "I wonder what her story is," she mused, fingers hovering near the projection. "Where is her mother? What drives someone to hunt their own father?"

"She seems nice," George offered suddenly, his sincere tone breaking the heavy atmosphere.

All heads turned toward him in unison. George sat with hands clasped before him, face set in earnest contemplation.

"You know... besides the whole murder thing," he added sheepishly. "It's just that—she has the face of someone who's been heartbroken. I bet she's really nice underneath all that sadness." He touched his lip. "Right...?"

The observation, so simple yet profound, left them momentarily speechless. Fred recovered first, brushing it all away with a scoff. "*Nice?*" he echoed the word, twisting it into something acidic. "She's tried to kill him twice, and assassins don't typically schedule third appointments to exchange pleasantries. Whatever she is—whatever made her—it's consumed everything else."

He swiped through the projection, bringing up the detailed information panel that should contain Allie's history, known family, and criminal record. The text appeared, but instead of coherent information, the screen filled with jumbled characters. Fred's stomach dropped. He tried again, accessing a different section of her file.

The same jumbled text appeared.

"What the hell?" Fred's claws scraped against the console as he frantically tried another search parameter. Each attempt yielded more strings of random numbers, symbols, and letters that made no logical sense.

Sue leaned over his shoulder. "Is it some kind of encryption?"

"No." Fred's voice was hollow. "It's corruption. *Deliberate* corruption."

Fred tapped another sequence, filling the space with a sprawling tactical display. Stars and planetary systems materialized in glowing blue light as he gestured for everyone to gather around.

"We need a plan," Fred announced, his authoritative tone in full swing.

He reached into the holographic chart, expanding the view until a particular sector filled the display. His stubby fingers traced a path through the projected cosmos, honing in on a specific location.

"The Armory." He circled the area in digital red. "Where this pistol was manufactured. The branding matches here on the barrel."

The team leaned closer, examining the weapon Fred held up.

"Here's what I propose." Fred scanned their faces. "Sue and I will take Fingerhead off-grid. Somewhere completely dark." He squinted. "Assassin-proof."

He turned to George and Bob. "You two will track Allie down, starting at The Armory. Follow her trail."

"Wait, what—why us!?" Bob's hand landed on his chest, voice sheer.

"You're more than capable. George provides protection while you put your tracking skills to use."

Bob blinked at the indirect praise, though it wasn't enough to quell his quivering frown, the dryness in his mouth—the ringing that numbed his ears making it impossible to hear the rest of Fred's speech.

George suddenly appeared behind Bob, lifting him up with excitement. "Oh boy! Isn't this exciting, Bob? Just the two of us on a daring high-stakes adventure!"

Sue stepped into Fred's line of sight, her eyes brimming with unspoken questions.

"George's sincerity is our greatest asset," Fred said quietly. "Perhaps he can reach her, appeal to whatever mercy might remain. If we can get her side of the story, it's *possible* we can even help Fingerhead reconcile with her."

He moved around the table to stand before his brother, placing a paw on his shoulder. "But if diplomacy fails, don't hesitate," Fred added, pressing a sleek silver device into George's palm. "Galactic Friend-issue stun weapon. Whatever method you use, you're bringing her to us."

George frowned, turning the weapon over. "Will it hurt her?"

"It's painless," Fred assured him, his face softening marginally. "Just a temporary neural disruption. She'll wake up with nothing worse than a headache."

George studied the weapon before nodding. "I understand. I'll try talking first, but I'll protect Bob if I have to."

"Good. And remember, this must be done in secrecy. We trust no one."

Bob straightened. "So we're actually working *against* the Galactic Friends?"

Fred's face locked onto Bob's, unyielding. "Trust me, it's better if they stay out of this. If there's corruption at play, and they find her before we do, we may never get a chance to put a stop to it."

Bob clasped his hands over his face. "Keeping secrets from the Galactic Friends feels wrong," he mumbled. "They're supposed to be the good guys. The system we believe in."

"You're one to talk." Fred's response came without hesitation. The hurt on Bob's face quickly made him reconsider.

Fred's scowl eased as he returned to the console, fingers automatic across the keys. The stars winked out one by one, leaving the room dim.

"Sometimes the system that's meant to protect us becomes the thing we need protection from," he lamented. "Until we understand why Allie is hunting Fingerhead, and who might be backing her, we're on our own."

Sue moved beside her brother. "If there's a chance we can change her mind, then I'm in."

"Me too." George tucked the stun weapon into a pocket, his usual energy temporarily subdued by determination.

"You leave in an hour," Fred addressed George and Bob, checking his chronometer. "Take the auxiliary cruiser. It's smaller, faster, and less likely to draw attention."

George hovered higher. "We won't let you down, bro! We'll find her and figure out why she's so angry at her dad."

Fred allowed himself a small smile at his brother's simplistic but wholehearted promise. "I know you will."

"What about communication?" Bob asked. "And what about—"

"Encrypted channels only. And minimal contact. We can't risk exposing either team's position."

Bob gulped, pacing in a small circle. "Fred—I can't."

"Yes you can." Fred adjusted his sleeve, barely acknowledging the explorer now.

"Fred!" Bob grabbed at the fixed sleeve, crinkling it again.

Finally Fred turned, the red in his eyes darker. "Listen to me. This is your chance to start rebuilding what you've destroyed. Want my advice?" He jabbed harshly at Bob's shoulder. "Take it."

Bob closed his eyes, when they reopened he saw Sue approach from behind through blurred vision, knowing another scolding at her brother in his defense was coming. He held out his hand to stop her.

"Give me the gun."

Bob's voice deepened in a way Fred didn't think was possible, the uncharacteristic burn in his gaze sending a mild shiver up the alien's spine. He hovered Allie's gun over the human's hand, hesitating a moment before letting it go.

Bob squeezed the barrel, staring at it with an unsteady resolve. Fred swallowed, sensing an intense wave of anger while anticipating his next move. When the human turned and speed-walked out of the room, the alien allowed himself to exhale.

Sue glared at her brother before sprinting where her husband disappeared. Fred only groaned and rubbed his temples, turning back to the console and ignoring George's lingering, conflicted observance.

Eventually George quietly hovered away to prepare. Fred remained, calling up one final image—Allie's face. He studied it silently, wishing he could sense what was really behind the screen.

"What are you hiding?"

With the question hanging unanswered, Fred switched off the terminal, plunging the room into darkness.

The void of space never looked so tempting to jump into, to be swallowed up by and forgotten. Bob leered at it from Sue's quarters, causing him temporary pause from his packing. He hastily smoothed out his exploration vest, tucking electronic devices and personal items into hidden pockets.

The door slid open, and Sue quietly entered. Her expression full of concern as she took in her husband's agitated state.

"Everything okay?"

Bob's response was a noncommittal shrug. His back stayed turned, the stuffing of supplies only becoming more aggressive.

"Oh sweetheart," Sue sighed. "I know things have been hectic, but George is really looking forward to this mission with you."

Bob's arms dropped, still refusing to face her. Sue stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him from behind, pressing her face between his shoulder blades. Her embrace was warm, encompassing. Undeserved.

"I love you," she whispered against his back. "Don't ever think otherwise."

She turned him around gently, studying him before her lips found his with familiar tenderness, her reassurance pouring hopelessly into the contact.

He kissed her back, but his mind was trapped elsewhere. Sue could feel the mechanical nature of his touch. She pulled away, placing a hand on his cheek while he stared past her to some invisible point.

"Sometimes I wonder why you fell for me at all." Bob wondered aloud. "I mean, honestly, Sue... we probably wouldn't even be together if I hadn't pretended to be someone I wasn't."

A dark shadow crossed Sue's features. Her hands turned to fist at her sides. This wasn't the timid reassurance Bob expected, but something building, ready to explode.

"Bob," she began, then stopped to bite her lip, eyes dropping to the floor. When she looked back up, there was something familiar reflecting through them. "You weren't the only one."

Bob blinked, not understanding. "What do you mean?"

Sue stepped back, wrapping her arms around herself as if trying to keep warm. "Back in the Underground World, when you first found me... when we first met..." Her voice grew smaller with each word until the last was a whisper. "I used my powers on you."

There was a spell of silence before the pieces clicked into place. "You mean," he finally managed. "You... *hypnotized* me?"

Sue nodded, crumbling in her misery. "I was so lonely, Bob. I'd been there for so long, and when this kind, cute, *dorky* stranger appeared—someone who didn't *see* a superhero..."

She almost chuckled when Bob flinched, rubbing his blushing neck. She held his hands to reset his attention.

"I couldn't bear the thought of being alone again. So I... I influenced your desires. Made sure you wouldn't want to leave too quickly."

Bob stared at her, grappling with this revelation. In the corner of his mind, he could almost feel it from memory; that strange, dreamlike quality those early times had possessed. The way his feelings for her had seemed to bloom so suddenly, so intensely.

"How long?" Bob moved a strand of hair from her face, with wide, frightened eyes peering into hers.

"Not long," she rushed to explain. "Just those first few hours, until I was sure you genuinely cared. But by then, I was already falling for you myself, and I couldn't bring myself to tell you the truth."

A strange laugh bubbled up from Bob's chest. Not bitter, but almost relieved. "So, we're both fibbers."

"I suppose we are." Sue's eyes brimmed with tears. "I'm so sorry, sweetie. I know it doesn't excuse what I did, but I was terrified and desperate and—"

"Sue." Bob squeezed her hands, cutting her spiral. "I forgive you."

The words came out like instinct, surprising them both. Sue looked up at him with wonder. "Just like that?" she whispered.

"Just like that." Bob's smile was the first genuine one she'd seen from him in days. "We both made mistakes. We both acted out of fear and loneliness. But what we have now—what we built together—that's real, isn't it?"

Through her tears, Sue nodded. "More real than anything I've ever known."

"Then that's what matters." Bob pulled her close, their tears mingling as he nuzzled his face against hers.

"But you have to do something for me," Sue murmured against his cheek. "You have to accept my forgiveness—*really* accept it. Not just say you do, but *believe* it."

Bob felt the need to protest, to insist he didn't deserve it, but the tender look on her face stopped him. "I'll..." He sniffed. "I'll try."

Sue broke into a smile, pulling him into another kiss. This time, Bob was fully present. His eyes closed, his arms tightened around her, and for a moment the mission, the danger, and all their complicated history faded away.

As they embraced, Bob felt lighter in her warmth. So light in fact, he grew suddenly paranoid that gravity stopped working all together. He pulled back and eyed Sue with a suspicious grin.

"You're not using your powers on me right now, are you?" The almost fearful tone he injected suggested he was only half joking.

The songstress's lips tightened, stepping back and punching her husband's arm—perhaps hard enough to leave a bruise—but even still, he laughed heartily and it wasn't long before Sue joined him.

While the couple spent the rest of their time gathering the remaining supplies, Sue's forgiveness ran through Bob's blood like a drug, stronger than guilt. He would face The Armory's shadows now, not as Captain Bob, fraud and coward, but as himself: flawed, forgiven, and ready to avenge Fingerhead.

Then from somewhere in the ship came George's optimistic voice calling out their names. The door to reality creaked open, and through the breach, all the shame and doubt came rushing back.

Chapter End Notes

Headcanon: Sneezy WORSHIPS Fred. Total man-crush vibes.

Also, in my GSH universe, Hooland has been mysteriously destroyed! DUN DUN DUN. And Hoo Hoos are their own species of alien. :D

And Sue's questionable hypnotizing of Bob (canon) comes to light... way worse than Bob's lie if you ask me.

Idk how to add a picture so here's a link to Allie's design:

<https://www.tumblr.com/twisty-little-passages/784812253594681344/she-looks-familiar>

Chapter 8: Go with the Flow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Some beings were born to be among the stars. George was one of them.

Flying was second nature to him, and it showed in the ease with which he guided the cruiser through a crowded asteroid belt en route to the Armory. For all his clumsiness on solid ground, in space he became a creature of grace.

"—and I bet she likes to fish too, just like her dad!" George gasped. "I bet she knows all kinds of cool techniques that her dad taught her before they had their big fight. Oh! Maybe we can all go fishing together once this whole mess is over!"

As George spoke, two hands rested on the navigation yoke while the other pair gestured wildly, constructing an elaborate personality for Fingerhead's daughter based on nothing but optimism and wishful thinking.

The cruiser he piloted was small by galactic standards—barely large enough for two passengers—yet in the vastness around them, even the mightiest celestial bodies were reduced to specks.

Bob huddled in the co-pilot's seat, knees drawn up against the viewport's edge. His trusty notepad balanced unsteadily on his lap while his dull pencil bled out in distracted strokes, sketching the outline of Sue's face from memory.

His gaze lingered on the swoop of her lashes, the quirk of her smile when she was about to laugh at one of his jokes. Only a night since departure, yet the hollow ache in his chest felt like weeks.

"Maybe she has a hobby?" George chirped uninvited in Bob's ear. "Like, when she's not busy hunting her dad, she goes home and—I don't know—knits or something?"

Bob's careful strokes switched to a scraping descent against the paper. His silence had nothing to do with George and everything to do with pretending he wasn't there.

"Though if she *does* knit, it'd probably involve voodooing dolls of her dad or whatever. *Yikes*," George dragged, elbowing his quiet companion.

Still, even if Bob kept silent, George continued his one-sided conversation about Allie: theorizing about her favorite color, what her voice might sound like, even her political stance on sentient fish rights. All of this the explorer absorbed without offering a single opinion.

Bob glanced up briefly at his brother-in-law, but when he resumed sketching, he blinked with a startling realization. The face taking shape beneath the pencil had started as Sue—he was

certain of it—but somewhere along the way, the eyes had multiplied into a triangle of three. Her smile, now a deadly scowl.

He had been drawing Allie.

A chill crawled up his spine. Though crude and unfinished, there was something in the sketch that unnerved him. Allie's holographic image had burned itself into his brain, replacing his wife's features with those of a killer.

He tore the page from his notepad, crumpling it into a ball before tossing it aside. This seemed to catch George's attention, finally registering Bob's hunched posture and downcast eyes.

"Hey," George ventured, his voice gentler than his massive teeth should allow. "You okay, champ?"

The human blinked up at him, as though suddenly remembering he wasn't alone. "Hm? Oh. Yeah. Fine."

George's head tilted like a curious puppy. "I don't know." He stretched. "You look like me that one time when I accidentally ate a puffer fish—before I realized the poison didn't affect me."

A tinged smile formed, but Bob wiped it off his face. "That's a very specific comparison."

George nodded sagely. He adjusted course with his lower left hand while his upper right scratched thoughtfully at his chin. "So what's on your mind? The arms thing, right?"

Bob sighed into his knees, hoping that would be a good enough answer.

"Because I really do forgive you," George continued undeterred. "Sometimes you just wanna make the best impression to make as many friends as possible. I get that."

Finally Bob turned to face him, caught off guard by the alien's empathy. George's expression held no judgment—just genuine understanding.

"But I *lied* to you." Bob squirmed with frustration, as if wanting George to be angry too. "It wasn't some small thing—I built my *entire* career on what you believed for years!"

George swiveled in his seat, activating the autopilot with a casual tap to give Bob his full attention.

"Yeah, you did," George stated simply. He extended a pink hand, placing it firmly on Bob's shoulder while another rested on his own knee.

Bob looked up, expecting something, anything. When nothing else came, he huffed and slouched deeper into his seat, returning to his notepad where he began aggressively sketching meaningless shapes.

George's smile blinked into something more thoughtful. "Look, I know you *think* what you did was terrible—and maybe it wasn't super great, but—"

"I appreciate what you're trying to do," Bob cut in, attempting to leave it at that.

"What *matters* is you're fixing it," George continued with a lilt of certainty. "Not because you want people to like you again—but because it's the right thing to do."

Bob stared at George, as if meeting him for the first time. "Oh, George..." he sighed. "I don't deserve your kindness."

George's expression grew as serious as his perpetually cheerful face could manage. "That's not how kindness works, Bob. It's not something you *earn*. It's something you *give*."

Now the explorer seemed absolutely taken aback. "So you're a philosopher now? When did that happen?"

George beamed. "I read a fortune cookie once. Changed my whole outlook."

Bob couldn't help it—he laughed. But once it died down, the sick feeling in his core returned and so did the silence for several more beats into their journey.

The pink alien wasn't having it this time though. His lower right hand crept toward the radio controls. With a wide grin, he cranked up the volume on an upbeat hip-hop song that suddenly blasted through the cockpit's speakers.

"Huh!?" Bob startled, bouncing involuntarily in his seat as the thumping bass vibrated through the floor.

George bobbed his head to the beat, his movements so vigorous that his cap slipped sideways. "I LOVE THIS SONG!" he shouted over the music, completely abandoning any pretense of indoor volume.

Bob watched in bewilderment as George belted out lyrics with more enthusiasm than accuracy, alternating between piloting and performing elaborate dance moves that threatened both Bob and the ship's stability.

"C'MON BOBBERT!" George pointed at him. "YOU KNOW THE WORDS!"

"I absolutely do *not* know the words!" Bob crossed his arms, but the absurdity of the moment kept him smiling.

"SURE YOU DO!" George insisted, grabbing Bob's arm and forcing it to wave in time with the music.

As if on cue, the song's chorus kicked in—a simple, repetitive chant that even Bob had to admit was impossible not to learn after hearing it once. He resisted initially, but George's infectious energy was relentless.

"Okay, okay!" Bob relented, reclaiming autonomy of his arm with a yank.

"I CAN'T HEAR YOU!" George singsonged, cupping one hand behind where his ear would be if he had visible ones.

"OKAY!"

There was a moment of pause, then, with a wild abandon that surprised even George, Bob's entire body suddenly surrendered to the rhythm. He leaped from his seat and began dancing with balled-up energy in what little space the cockpit had to offer.

"OH YEAH!" George howled with delight, his eyes wide at the unexpected transformation. "GET IT, BOB!"

Bob grabbed his pencil and held it close to his mouth like a microphone, belting out crude lyrics that would've given Fred a heart-attack. The once mild-mannered explorer was now on his knees, throwing his head back as if chanting to the rap gods.

"YO, YO, CHECK IT OUT!" Bob shouted, extending an arm outward before popping back up on his toes. "CAPTAIN BOB IS IN THE HOUSEHOLD!"

George roared with laughter, four arms dividing equally into knee slapping and scratching imaginary turntables. "DJ G-FORCE COMIN' AT CHA!" he bellowed, making a rather convincing record-scratching sound with his mouth.

The cruiser rocked dangerously as the two men transformed the cockpit into an impromptu nightclub. The stars around them twinkled with the beat, with one in particular brighter than the others.

"DROP THE BEAT, G!" Bob commanded, pounding his chest with one fist before throwing up a few unidentifiable gang signs.

George obliged, launching into an impressive display of beat-boxing that enhanced the music. His cheeks puffed and vibrated as he produced a complex rhythm of booms, clicks, and pops that seemed impossible from a single mouth.

Bob hunched forward, gripping his pencil-microphone tightly as he launched into a freestyle that made George melodramatically faint in his seat.

"—WE'RE HUNTING A LADY WITH EYES TIMES THREE, WHO'S GOT SOME BEEF WITH OLD FINGERHEAD, SEE?"

Outside the viewport, a small flash of red streaked past the ship. Had either of them been paying attention, they might have noticed its unnatural trajectory. But they remained oblivious, lost in their private performance.

For this perfect, suspended moment, they were just two idiots on a joyride together, free from the weight of the mission. And then, as the final chorus started, a third voice joined in—high-pitched, melodic, and perfectly on beat.

"Hoo! Hoo-hoo-hoo!"

Bob froze with his arms suspended awkwardly above his head. Something about that sound didn't belong to either the track or George. Slowly, he turned his head toward the source.

Floating just behind them, between the pilot and co-pilot seats, was a small red creature with bulbous eyes and a perfectly circular mouth. Its tiny hands were raised in what appeared to be the universal gesture for "dropping sick beats".

George, still lost in the moment, kept dancing with what Bob realized was a Hoo Hoo. Stuck in place for only a second longer, the human's brain finally connected to his vocal cords.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!"

The Hoo Hoo, startled by Bob's sudden outburst, immediately mirrored his reaction with equal intensity.

"HOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

George looked between them in confusion before the realization dawned on his face. "Oh, a screaming contest! I want in!" he chirped before joining in with his own screech of 'terror'.

The cruiser filled with their combined screams, drowning out the music that still thumped cheerfully in the background. Bob's hands flew to the ship's controls, desperately reaching for the emergency brake with a slam of his palm.

The cruiser jerked to an abrupt stop, inertia shooting both Bob and George forward where their bodies smacked against the glass in comical splats, faces and limbs sticking against the transparent surface like insects on a windshield.

The Hoo Hoo, unaffected by the laws of physics that had just pancaked the ship's legitimate occupants, continued to float serenely in the exact same spot. It tilted its head, curiously studying the flattened passengers.

"Hoo?" it inquired softly, blinking its enormous eyes.

Bob peeled himself from the viewport with a sound reminiscent of wet suction cups before falling back into his seat. George followed suit, dazed and confused.

"What," Bob gasped, pointing a trembling finger at their visitor, "is *THAT* doing here?"

The Hoo Hoo folded its tiny arms across its chest, clearly offended by being referred to as a "that". "Hoo," it stated firmly.

"It's a Hoo Hoo," George whispered unnecessarily.

Bob scrambled backward in his seat, putting as much distance between himself and the creature. "I know what it is! What I don't know is how it got on our ship or what it wants!"

The Hoo Hoo floated closer to Bob, who sunk deeper into the cushions. The creature's mouth began expanding and contracting, emitting a series of musical tones.

Bob's lips puckered. "I uh, never learned Hoo. Do you understand this thing, George?"

George scrunched his face in concentration. "Hmm. I think it's trying... to tell us... *something*."

The human rolled his eyes at the unhelpful translation. The Hoo Hoo on the other hand, beamed with excitement before launching into a more complex series of musical notes, gesturing frantically in the air.

"Yep! It's *definitely* saying something," George concluded proudly, crossing two arms with his eyes closed.

Bob groaned and The Hoo Hoo's expression fell, its frustration palpable as it tried again, slower this time, enunciating each "hoo" with exaggerated clarity. When neither passenger showed signs of comprehension, the creature's bulbous orbs narrowed.

With a sound of obvious exasperation, it zipped around the cockpit and disappeared behind their seats. The crumpled ball of paper Bob had discarded earlier suddenly flew through the air, smacking against the control panel with a crisp whump.

The Hoo Hoo reappeared, smoothing out the wrinkled sketch with its hands. Bob felt his stomach drop as he recognized his own drawing of Allie. The creature jabbed its finger repeatedly at it, then pointed out into the depths of space.

George gasped. "Bob! I think it knows where Allie is!"

Bob squinted at the drawing, then at the Hoo Hoo, then at the endless void beyond their ship. "That's... odd."

"This could be the lead we need," George whispered, his excitement building. "Think about it—the Hoo Hoo warning about Fingerhead. What if they're all connected somehow?"

Bob took a moment to mentally balance the options. It wasn't the same Hoo Hoo that warned them and every instinct told him not to trust this random creature that had somehow stowed away on their ship.

"I don't know," Bob hedged, chewing his lower lip. "Fred was pretty clear about us heading to The Armory first."

"Well I think we should follow it," George decided, placing his hand over the navigation controls. "What's the worst that could happen?"

Bob could think of about fifty worst-case scenarios in under three seconds, but none of them seemed worth voicing when weighed against the possibility of shortcutting this whole mess.

"Alright," he finally conceded, "but you're calling Fred and telling him this was *your* idea. I'm not getting yelled at for going off script."

George's face lit up. "Deal!"

The Hoo Hoo squealed with joy, performing a celebratory loop-de-loop before zooming toward a vent. Seconds later, they spotted it outside, beckoning them to follow.

The moment their engines engaged, the Hoo Hoo spun ahead, its small form a guiding beacon against the starfield. But as the darkness stretched around them, Bob couldn't shake the feeling they were flies willingly entering a spider's web—each mile they chased the little creature, the shadows around their ship felt thicker, darker.

The explorer glanced down at the navigation console, thumbing the radar scan. The green sweep circled, returned nothing but static and empty pings. No threats. No ships. Nothing at all.

That should've settled his nerves. Instead, his gut twisted tighter.

Bob's focus shifted to the growing goosebumps on his arm. His hunches had a habit of becoming real—webs and all. He silently begged the universe to prove him wrong, just this once.

He really should've known better by now.

The dark seemed to move in from behind. Two ebony-cloaked shapes were stalking them, flanking the cruiser on both sides. The apparitions seemed to absorb rather than reflect starlight, their surfaces rippling with something far more sinister than simple shadows.

The Hoo Hoo was the first to notice after it spun around just for the fun of it. Once large eyes locked on the trailing objects, it screeched and darted away from the cruiser.

"Hey, where did it—?" Bob's question died as the cruiser lurched violently to starboard.

The impact sent both passengers flying from their seats. Bob crashed into the side wall before George caught him with two arms, the other two scrambling for purchase.

"What the heck was that?!" Bob screamed, scrambling back to his seat and fumbling with the safety belt.

George pulled himself upright, his eyes widening when he finally spotted what had spooked their guide. "Uh oh. Hostiles."

Bob's head whipped around to the rear viewport. Two black silhouettes loomed behind them; large and shark-shaped, cutting through space like mobile voids.

George's hands flew across the controls, adrenaline sharpening his focus. The cruiser—built for transport rather than combat—responded with an agility that barely dodged the incoming laser-beams.

The shark-ships rocketed forward, their soundless engines leaving trails of pale blue fire. George strained at the controls, attempting evasive maneuvers.

"They're shooting at us!" Bob shrieked the obvious, curling into a ball. Another blast rocked the ship, and he screamed bloody murder. "Why are they shooting at us!?"

George on the other hand, was in his element. "It's okay! I got this!" he shouted, pushing the cruiser beyond its design specifications.

"I *knew* I should've told Fred this was a bad idea! Now we're both gonna die!"

"Not helping, Bob!" George grunted, executing a sharp barrel roll. The maneuver bought them seconds at best before the shark-ships adjusted course.

Through the chaos, Bob caught a glimpse of their pursuers. The ships had abandoned their camouflage, revealing fronts that resembled actual shark mouths, complete with metallic teeth gleaming. Twin cannons protruded from what would be eyes, their glow intensifying as they charged for another volley.

And then, something extraordinary happened.

The lead shark-ship suddenly convulsed, its hull stalling as if seized by invisible hands. Dark smoke poured from its engines, billowing outward in thick, oily clouds. The second ship faltered moments later.

Bob and George stared in disbelief as their pursuers peeled away, limping back into the darkness like wounded wolves retreating to lick their wounds.

"What just happened?" Bob whispered, afraid that speaking too loudly might somehow reverse their miraculous reprieve.

George eased back on the throttle, allowing the cruiser to coast as he checked their systems. "I don't know. They just... broke."

A familiar sound drew their attention to the air vent above the control panel. It popped open with a metallic ping, and out tumbled the Hoo Hoo, covered in grease and clutching what appeared to be a wrench in its waving hands.

"Hoo!" it announced triumphantly, dropping the tool onto the dashboard with a clatter.

George's eyes widened. "Dude. No way."

The Hoo Hoo performed a proud little bow, its mouth curved into a smug smile.

"You... did you just—you sabotaged their ships?" Bob stammered, leaning forward to examine the grease-covered creature. "How did you even—!?"

George smiled. "They're naturals with ships! The little dudes hide and thrive in them all the time, remember?"

Bob's jaw hung open. "I don't know what to say," he managed, gratitude catching in his throat. "You saved us. Thank you."

The Hoo Hoo trilled happily and floated closer to pat Bob's forehead with a greasy hand, leaving a black smudge that the explorer didn't even mind.

"Hoo hoo!" it sang, pointing once again to Bob's crumpled drawing of Allie, then gesturing forward as before.

Bob exchanged a withdrawn smile with George's energetic one. "Well, I guess I can't argue with you now. Just... don't make me regret this."

George chuckled and returned his hands to the controls. "Lead the way, little buddy!"

The Hoo Hoo zipped back outside, resuming its position as their guide and Bob watched it with marginally less suspicion. The tiny creature moved purposefully while occasionally checking back to ensure they were following, and perhaps, that they were safe.

And deeper into the cosmos they flew. Behind them, the disabled shark-ships drifted lifelessly, their pilots already sending distress signals that would go unanswered for hours.

Hopefully.

Chapter End Notes

Headcanon of the day serving it up Gary's way: Bob is an artist and George can beat box!

Ok sobering up for a sec, I amused myself greatly while writing this. Exploring Bob and George's dynamic is so fun! In the next chapter we will explore the dynamic of Sue, Fred and Fingerhead. :D

And yes the Hoo Hoo is the same mysterious red one seen on Fingerhead's ship that one episode! Idk if it has a proper name but for now I'll just call him Red!

Chapter 9: No Man's Hooland

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Inside the Galactic Friends ship, Fred and Sue sat in the dining nook where a map of locations crosshatched with circles and footnotes sprawled like flattened origami between them. Each potential hideout met the same precarious fate. Every option was a risk. Every system, a maybe.

"What about the Underground World?" Sue offered, tapping a chipped-polish fingernail against her teacup. "It's peaceful, secluded. Might be worth revisiting."

Fred's fangs pinched the corners of his mouth. "No good. The Red Planet's a historical site now. Crawling with tourists, Galactic Friend patrols..."

"And the Fish District?" Sue pressed, circling another area. "Far from major trade routes, plenty of natural spots to—"

"Too unpredictable," Fred gave her a dismissive wave. "And dangerous."

Sue sighed. Another option crossed from their dwindling list. "How about the Icy Caves of Europa?" she ventured. "I've heard—"

"Mining operations. Too cold."

"The Tranquil Gardens—"

"Radiation exposure. Next."

Sue's fingernail stopped tapping. She had spent the better part of an hour this morning researching random locale with her brother, only to watch each suggestion get swatted down like an annoying insect.

"Well then, *brother dear*," Sue's voice dripped with saccharine venom as she leaned back in the booth, "perhaps you'd like to share one of your *brilliant* alternatives?"

Fred's head snapped up from the map, eyes blinking an orange hue at the sudden friction. "I'm just being thorough, Sue. We can't afford mistakes."

"Thorough?" Sue's laugh was sharp. "You mean stubborn? There's a difference, you know."

"I am not stubborn!" Fred protested, his voice pitching higher in a way that made him sound like the petulant child he'd once been. "I'm cautious! There's a difference, *you know*," he added, parroting her words.

"Oh, forgive me, *Your Majesty*. How dare I question your infinite wisdom..."

"Don't be dramatic," Fred scoffed, though his own posture had been the very picture of theatrics—chin up, shoulders squared.

"Says the alien who once threw a three-day tantrum because George rearranged the sock drawer."

"That was organizational sabotage and you know it!"

The sound of shuffling arose from the corridor, derailing their argument. There, a figure precariously teetered against gravity at its threshold.

Fingerhead stumbled forward with the gait of an underwater sleepwalker, either ignoring them or unaware of their presence entirely. The usual world-weary focus in his eyes, now half clouded by a heavy-lidded fog as he managed his way to the kitchen.

The siblings dropped everything when Fingerhead's knees grazed the ground, lunging at the refrigerator only to collide into it face-first with a thud so harsh it made them both flinch. He pawed blindly at it, eventually wrenching it open with a sharp pop that sent him tumbling backward, still clinging to the handle.

Once grounded enough to stuff his face inside, he began sniffing and discarding items at random—freeze-dried noodles, artificial cheese, something purple—all tossed aside with hazy indifference.

"Uh, Fingerhead? You okay?" Fred pressed a foot beneath the booth, ready to stand.

But words were a currency from a bankrupt economy. Instead, Fingerhead murkily groaned and extracted a package of synthetic protein strips, then without removing the wrapper, shoved it into his mouth and began mindlessly chewing on the packaging.

"That's concerning," Sue whispered in a cuffed hand.

Before Fred could agree, a primitive grunt escaped the fisherman. The package dropped from his mouth, nostrils flaring when he caught the scent of freshly brewed coffee. Immediately his sights locked onto the full kettle on the counter.

In three unsteady strides, he reached the carafe and clamped down on it as if it might vanish before he could claim it. Desperately, he poured the scalding liquid straight down his throat, hot mist curling from his jaw until the very last drop was gulped.

"Fingerhead! You're going to burn your insides out," Sue fretted, hastily setting down her tea.

The songstress approached the fisherman with the same careful grace she might use toward a wounded animal, and gently placed a hand on his back—a pacifying nudge she quickly realized was anything but.

At her touch, Fingerhead jerked away with such violence that it spelled devastation for the confined space. Dishes clattered to the floor. His back scraped against the counter while holding onto it with a death-grip. Nothing coherent could be translated between his deep, gasping breaths.

Fred was on his feet in an instant, positioned protectively behind Sue. She recoiled into him instinctively, and for a moment—as Fingerhead's shrunken pupils thrashed around the kitchen—the cornered fisherman seemed not to recognize either of them.

"Hey there." Sue held up a palm while her other hand kept Fred at bay. "It's okay," she soothed in a low hum. "It's just me. You're safe here."

Slowly the wildness in Fingerhead's eyes gave way to recognition. Like a storm front passing, the blind panic receded, leaving behind a deep exhaustion that pulled at every feature of his face.

"Sorry—I just—" he rasped, shaking his head as his gaze dropped to the shattered ceramic on the floor. "Thought you were someone else."

Fred peered over Sue, catching the unhealed scars that still mapped Fingerhead's body—echoes of the deeper non-physical wounds. To his sister's relief, he recognized when to stand down. This wasn't a fight to be won with his particular brand of aggressive problem-solving.

The hero retreated, settling back into the nook with a creak of surrender. From this vantage point, he could observe without interfering. It was, perhaps, an exercise in trust without controlling.

Sue waited a beat, letting the silence hold them. Only when Fingerhead's breathing evened out did she speak above a whisper. "That's a lot of caffeine," she reckoned, cautiously taking the coffee pot from his shaking grasp. "You're going to be jittery for hours."

"Need it," Fingerhead exhaled, wiping his chin. "Mouthbottom... he's still not..."

The phantom giggle-chamber in his mind—a place Mouthbottom usually occupied—echoed like a vast, cold cavern. Fingerhead clawed at the walls of his own consciousness, and with each desperate scrape echoing back his own unnatural solitude, searched for the faintest trace of his other half.

Nothing.

"He was the morning person," Fingerhead finally managed, the laugh that followed was a brittle sound. "Without him—" He glanced at the carafe, practically drooling again. "Need more coffee."

Sue's expression softened with sudden understanding. "Oh, you poor thing," she consoled, professional tone giving way to genuine empathy. She placed the pot on the counter, out of his reach. "That explains everything."

Her gaze grew distant for a moment, then a spark of an idea—fragile but determined—lit her eyes. "You know," she mused, "when I sing, I can feel the resonant frequencies of my surroundings—even in people. Your connection with Mouthbottom always had its own harmony."

Fingerhead pushed himself upward, though his grip on the counter barely stabilized his wobbling arms. "Y-yeah? And?"

"Well, I've been reading about techniques to amplify those connections. It's experimental, especially with biology as unique as yours. But maybe... maybe I can help you listen for him."

Fingerhead looked from her to Fred and back again. "Help me listen?"

"It's just a theory I had last night," she admitted, offering a small, self-deprecating smile. "But it's better than nothing, isn't it?"

Sue held out her hand, palm up—an invitation, not a demand. Within the fisherman, hope flickered before doubt clouded over it. A faint blue tinge swept across his sweating face, caught in a net of vulnerability he couldn't escape.

Fingerhead let out a long, shuddering breath, studying her outstretched hand while his own twitched indecisively at his sides. Then with a reluctance that nearly froze him solid, he made his decision.

"I guess so," he murmured, taking her hand.

Sue smiled up at him. "This way," she whispered, leading him toward the med bay with a tightening grip. "We'll see what we can do for Mouthbottom. I have a few tools I've been itching to try—if you're up to it."

The nervous twitch in Fingerhead's lower eyelid would have made Mouthbottom laugh. Seeing the mess he's become. But now the truly lone fisherman could only gulp in his absence.

As they walked away, Fingerhead glanced over his shoulder, carrying a batch of emotions for Fred to read: shame, fear, and something that might have been gratitude had it not been buried under layers of skepticism.

Fred nodded, his eyes holding Fingerhead's for a heartbeat longer than intended; a wordless contract neither believed but both desperately needed. That everything would be okay. But the fisherman had already disappeared along his sister's excited trail, leaving him alone with a promise he had no power to keep.

So Fred surveyed the kitchen, taking in the scattered food packages and shattered dishes—the chaos that followed Fingerhead wherever he went. He hissed at the mess, as if he could intimidate it into cleaning itself. When that failed, he snatched up a mop.

No sooner had he made the place sparkle did Fred's communication watch light up with a crackling buzz, accompanied by a warbling rendition of the Galactic Friends' anthem. He stabbed at the answer button and George's face materialized on the tiny screen.

"Fred! Fred! You're not gonna believe this!" George's excitement peaked the audio system, his face pressed against the camera until only his comically magnified features were visible.

"George, back up," Fred instructed, pinching his temple. "I can't see anything but your eyeball."

"Oops, sorry!"

The image jostled as George adjusted, revealing the auxiliary craft's cockpit and a glimpse of Bob in the background, his expression tight and twitchy.

"That's better. Now what were you saying?" Fred asked.

"We found a Hoo Hoo!" George exclaimed. "It just showed up on the ship—but it saved us from a some crazy shark guys who attacked us and now it wants us to follow it! Should we? Can we? Please say yes!"

"You found—wait—*what!*?" Fred gripped his watch, feeling his pulse quicken with all this information hitting him at once. "Someone attacked you? Are you injured!?"

"We're fine! These ships came outta nowhere—then WHAM—the little guy disabled them and—"

"George, this is much more dangerous than I thought. Those strangers must be working for Allie. You are to abort the mission immediately! Do you understand?"

"But Fred, this Hoo Hoo—it knows about Allie!" George lowered his voice to an urgent whisper. "It's taking us to her right now!"

Fred froze. Though his heart still pounded, his panic shifted course to hope. "It does...? Are you certain?"

"It recognized Bob's drawing of her. Started hooing and pointing the way." George paused. "And... well, I've just got a feeling about this. Please, bro, you gotta trust me."

Fred weighed the implications. A Hoo Hoo with knowledge of Fingerhead's daughter couldn't be coincidence. He rarely trusted George's intuition—but something this time made him willing to chance it. Even if the mysterious ships remained troubling, he forced himself to swallow that risk.

"Follow it," Fred ordered, pitch dropping. "But proceed with *extreme* caution. Those ships attacked you for a reason."

"Yes, sir!" George saluted. "We'll be super duper careful! Promise!"

Before the transmission ended, Bob's face crowded the screen. "Hey Fred, quick question. I've been trying to reach Sue, but she's not picking up. Is everything okay?"

"She's in the med-bay with Fingerhead," Fred stated flatly. "Trying to help him reconnect with Mouthbottom. The process is very delicate. Best not to interrupt them."

"Oh. Okay. That's—okay. Cool."

Fred couldn't detect emotions through screens, but the possessiveness radiating from Bob was painfully obvious.

"Tell her I called?" Bob fidgeted, fishing for a promise.

Fred rolled his eyes. "Focus on the mission, Bob. And remember what I said. Be. Careful. Only call when absolutely necessary."

"Sure, sure—just one more thing. Is Sue—"

"Goodbye." Fred jabbed the disconnect button, cutting off whatever drama was forthcoming. Though privately, he wondered if Sue had made any progress with Fingerhead.

With a conflicted click of his tongue, Fred descended toward the med bay. The corridor stretched before him like a metal throat, swallowing light as he moved deeper. Faint music gargled from ahead, clarifying into an eerie soundtrack along the path.

When he reached the doorway, the metamorphosis of the space glued him in place. Overhead panels dimmed to only the memory of light. Candles were spread about casting their scattered illumination while the scent of lavender incense wrote in cursive tendrils, tickling Fred's sensitive snout.

At the ritual's heart: Fingerhead laid on his back, spellbound in Sue's vocal geometry. Stones of obsidian encircled him, each humming its portion of an otherworldly harmony that lifted Fred's fur in salute.

The songstress knelt in supplication, her head floating in its familiar separation just above the stem of her neck, while her hands cradled the fisherman's head as though it contained a newborn universe. Her voice poured forth, brows drawn together in concentration.

Both men seemed caught in her sonic web, breathing only when her music allowed. After several iterations, Sue sat back on her heels and wiped perspiration from her forehead, clearly reaching her limits. She glanced at Fred, then to his communicator with a flash of annoyance in her eyes.

Fred blinked thrice and shook his head before he noticed the device had been beeping around his wrist. He offered a silent apology for the interruption, turning away sheepishly. When he glanced down at the display, he grimaced.

"Having the MOST wonderful day thinking about our chat! Hope to see you VERY soon!"
The message from Sneezy was accompanied by a little Hoo Hoo emoji with its arms shaped like a heart.

Fred tucked the device under his sleeve. Clearly his earlier manipulation had worked *too* well. He made a mental note to let Sneezy down gently—eventually.

"Something wrong?" Sue asked her brother, noticing Fingerhead's eyes flutter open, only to close again with disappointment creasing them.

"Just Sneezy being... *enthusiastic*," Fred coughed. "Any luck with Mouthbottom?"

"Nothing yet," Sue sighed. "I'm really sorry, Fingerhead."

"Yeah." Fingerhead slapped a hand over his face. "Thanks anyway."

As Fred drew closer, a powerful emotional tide from Fingerhead washed over him. His usual sarcastic defenses were down, flooding free a genuine, bone-deep sadness. The shallow void he felt wasn't just the absence of an annoying sibling—it was the loss of half his soul.

In a frantic bid to ignore the deepening pit in his stomach, Fred's thoughts turned to the Hoo Hoo emoji. "So, um... George just called. They found a Hoo Hoo. Apparently it knows Allie and is taking them to her last known location."

"A Hoo Hoo, huh?" Sue's head reattached with a soft click. "Hm, well I suppose that makes sense. Was there anything else?"

"I..." Fred bit his lip, choosing not to mention the attack. No need to add to her worries. "I've been thinking about Hooland. Abandoned place like that could make a decent hideout while we figure this out."

At the mention of Hooland, Fingerhead tensed. His eyes snapped open as his body shot upward, startling Sue's head back into the air. "Hooland," he weighed. "That might not be a bad idea."

"Wait." Fred squinted. "Let me get this straight. You... *want* to go to Hooland?"

Fingerhead pushed himself to stand, shrugging off Sue's attempt to steady him. "I don't have to explain my reasons," he muttered, refusing to elaborate despite Fred's penetrating stare.

"That's not an answer."

"Wasn't meant to be."

"So you've made a decision then?" Sue crossed her arms, glancing impatiently between them.

Fred nodded slow and steady, never breaking eye contact with Fingerhead. "Hooland it is."

"Good." Fingerhead walked to the window, casually leaning against it. "I just need to get something from my..." His voice trailed off as his gaze drifted outward, but something he saw—or didn't see—made him gasp.

"*WHERE IS SHE!?*"

Fingerhead's face smacked against the glass, breath fogging the surface as his eyes swept the empty space outside.

"Your ship?" Fred puzzled. "Right where you left it when you—"

"Someone *took* her!" Fingerhead's voice cracked, his fist pounding uselessly against the transparent barrier. "Someone stole my ship!"

Fred was quick, his mind racing through limited solutions as he motioned Sue to follow. "The security cameras! Come on!"

They burst into the main room where the central terminal loomed over them. Fred flew across the interface, bringing up the ship's external security feed. The footage showed nothing but skeletal docking clamps where Fingerhead's vessel should have been. He rewound the timeline, hours blurring backward until he found it.

There—Fingerhead's arrival yesterday. The vessel had limped into their dock, scarred and smoking. Fred watched his past self rush to help before the fisherman collapsed nearly dead.

"Look at you," Sue whispered, observing the rare gentleness in her brother's movements. "You were so worried about him."

He shook off her comment and fast-forwarded through the security footage. Now Bob could be seen sprinting down the corridor to fetch Sue while Fred remained absorbed in checking Fingerhead's pulse, unaware of what was happening outside.

The ship simply left. No visible pilot, no warning—one moment docked, the next gliding away into space. They were still grasping at possibilities when an undeniable presence fell across them. Fingerhead stood there, his earlier panic replaced with an unnatural calm, hands clasped behind his back.

"It was Allie," he stated, his voice as dim as the void.

Sue's hands flew to her sleeve. "We can't be certain of that. There isn't enough evidence—"

"It was her."

"How can you be so sure?" Fred pressed, studying him.

Fingerhead's tentacles twitched—a nervous habit betraying his forced composure. His voice carried confession. "Because she's done it before..."

"After the gala," he continued, gaze fixed on the empty docking clamps outside. "When I left—when I ran like a *coward*—she followed me."

He became lost in the memory. "She... came out of nowhere. One second I was alone, then she was standing right behind me with that *damned* gun pressed against the back of my skull. If it wasn't for Mouthbottom..."

Sue felt tears pooling as she and Fred listened. Her brother's expression mirrored what his suit flashed in dire warning.

"How did you escape her?" Fred reached. "What did she *do* to you...?"

"I managed to push her into one of my eject pods. Don't remember much of the attack itself. Just... *Mouthbottom*... screaming from *my* mouth..." Fingerhead's throat vibrated with the words, and shortly after, he began to laugh.

Fred's senses recoiled. Pain and grief tasted like burnt cinnamon, followed by the tangy aftertaste of pride, all twisted into a knot of madness that lodged audibly in his throat. Fingerhead doubled over, hands on knees, wheezing until something within him seemed to snap. Then, stillness.

His pupils twisted toward Fred. "Your *boys*..." he began, taking a slow, creaking step forward. "What exactly are they planning to do when they *find* her?"

Fred found himself backing against the terminal wall, trapped between cold metal and the advancing fisherman. "They're—they're going to try talking to her first," he stammered, confidence deserting him as Fingerhead's fingers curled under his chin, tilting his head up.

"And if *talking* doesn't *work*?" The question slithered between them.

"Ah—" Fred gulped. "George is prepared to use force. N-non-lethal."

Fingerhead held his gaze a moment longer, still grinning. Fred could see himself reflected in those sea-blue eyes—small, flashing a helpless and utterly profound spectra. He glanced at Sue, who seemed just as terrified as him. Then as suddenly as the storm had arrived, it passed.

Fingerhead turned sharply toward the viewport, his reflection a ghost staring back. "Don't you *dare* hurt her," he whispered, apparently to the stars.

"I'm sure it won't come to that," Sue barged, approaching Fingerhead with compassion overriding her fear, but careful not to touch him. "Allie will be safe in their hands."

Fingerhead gave a snort of derision. "I wasn't talking about *her*." He jabbed a finger at the glass. "I was talking about my ship."

Sue and Fred locked eyes, matching expressions of exasperation crossing their faces. The emotional whiplash of Fingerhead's priorities was testing their patience—and their sanity.

In the silent expanse, the Galactic Friends ship threaded like a silver needle stitching through black velvet.

Approaching Hooland, they pierced through a dense debris field that marked its outer halo. Through the viewport stretched a junkyard metropolis of interconnected craft, abandoned, forming a massive ring-shaped city around an orphaned moon.

They docked amid dancing dust thick as snow, Fred feeling a chill run down his spine as they prepared to disembark. The low, mournful whistle of solar wind through empty doorways created a requiem for a civilization that had been trusted in their protection—protection that failed when he and his siblings disappeared on the Red Planet.

Fred stepped onto Hooland's surface with Sue and Fingerhead trailing behind. The gravity fluctuated erratically, making their steps feel light one moment and leaden the next. Perched on a hill of metal, he paused to absorb the crushing weight of desolation.

"Look at this place," Fred hollowly addressed himself as they moved through the ghost town. "Some *protectors* we were."

"It wasn't our fault." Sue's voice was muffled by the thick air as she approached her brother, never looking away from the horizon. "We were lost."

"I know. Damn it—I know." Fred rubbed his agitated eyes, the motes overwhelming. "It's just... hard to accept."

Fred turned to see Fingerhead standing far behind, upper body already covered in grey ash. He expected derision from the fisherman, perhaps even satisfaction given his hatred of Hoo Hoos. Instead, Fingerhead's emotional current held something he never anticipated—respect.

"Never knew it was this bad," Fingerhead acknowledged, shuffling forward to get a better scope of their surroundings.

Sue moved in another direction as a mourner approaches a grave, her fingers trailing across the remains of what had once been a communal gathering space. Tattered strips of once-colorful fabrics hung limply, their vibrancy dulled by years of silence.

Fred watched his sister grieve for a moment before his attention was drawn to Fingerhead, whose behavior had taken an odd turn. While the siblings focused on the destruction, the fisherman began wandering with urgent, purposeful movements around the rubble.

Fred nudged Sue, gesturing toward Fingerhead with a subtle tilt of his head. The same confusion from this morning returned in both their stares when the fisherman changed direction, charging toward a collapsed structure without looking back.

"Hey! Where are you going!?" Fred called, but it was clear that whatever was driving Fingerhead deeper into the ruins was more important than anything they could imagine.

Chapter End Notes

Headcanon: The siblings were once Hooland's main protectors. And Fingerhead...? Married to his ship.

Alrighty folks, this is where the story will probably be going into hiatus! because up to this point before posting chapter 1, I had just these chapters already half-cooked. Now I gotta start cooking from scratch but it shouldn't take TOO long since I know how I want this story to end.

Chapter 10: Dine and Dash

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

At last, here was the destination the Hoo Hoo had taken Bob and George; the Spiky Planet. A place where gray stretched endlessly, and not a drop of water dared to exist. Everywhere they looked, the land was riddled with steep, jagged hills and mountains stabbing at awkward angles, like the world itself was made of broken glass.

Their landing zone: a crater, ringed by hunks of rocky teeth. It was big enough to swallow a small town, and right at its yawning center sat the strangest sight of all—a diner. Completely incongruous, as if someone had scooped a chunk from Earth's glory days and plopped it straight into the crater's maw.

Bob pressed his eyes against long-scope binoculars, the pressure deep enough to tattoo rings on his skin. The outcrop they'd chosen jabbed up into his ribs, all sharp ridges offering no comfort, but the view was perfect. Nothing stood between him and their target.

The diner's chrome fixtures winked at him through the scopes, dazzlingly bright against the pink and silver siding; a relic perfectly preserved from a world that remembered color while time itself spared little else.

Next to him, George hunkered down, trying and failing to disappear into the rocks. "Is it her? Is she in there?" he whispered over Bob's head.

"Yup," Bob popped the word with smacking lips. "Our little friend was right. Led us straight to her."

George's long canines bit at his own chin, eyes gone wide and glued to the diner's entrance as if he expected someone to cart out a birthday cake with his name written in icing. The Hoo Hoo floated nearby with an attentive gaze on its new companions, occasionally hooing in between their conversations and nodding its head.

Bob felt his breath ebb and flow against the rocks as he turned the binoculars to sweep the crater floor. Something snagged his eye—a mess of netting, welded patches, and the dented hull nobody else could ever mistake. Old Fingerhead's vessel, anchored just beyond the diner's reach.

"Looks like she's not above thievery—go figure," Bob sourly noted.

He returned his sights inside the diner's windows. Allie sat alone at the counter, her skin a splash of ocean color against the interior's nostalgic pallet. The resemblance to her father was there in the set of her jaw, even the defensive curl of her posture as she picked her plate of food.

"What's she doing?" George leaned closer, a pebble slipping under his foot, sending a small cascade of grit tumbling into the valley below.

"Taking a break, apparently." Bob squinted behind the scope, scrutiny attuned to her every micro-movement. "Psychopaths gotta eat too."

George nodded, though his expression was starting to grow strangled. "So let's go in and talk to her already!"

Bob's blood ran cold. "George wait," he began, but the alien was already standing, brushing needle stones from his pants with impatient swipes.

"C'mon, man, I've been waiting forever!" George stretched all four arms above his head, popping the joints. "And don't you worry. I'm really good at making friends. At least, better than I *used* to be. No kidnapping required!" he laughed.

Bob lowered the binoculars, staring at the diner with naked dread. Fred had trusted them with this mission, and he was about to lead his naive brother-in-law directly to a would-be murderer's den. The explorer—now a discount superhero without powers—pulled out Allie's modified plasma weapon from his vest pocket and held it close to his chest.

"Here's what we're gonna do," Bob tried his best to sound confident while patting the gun into his palm. "You go in first. Be friendly, strike up a conversation. You're good at that—the whole approachable gentle giant thing."

George pointed at the clutched weapon. "What are you doing with—"

"While you're keeping her distracted, I'll slip around back and disable Fingerhead's navigation system. Just temporarily," Bob added quickly, seeing George's brows shoot up. "To make sure she can't bolt before we have a chance to really talk to her."

George's face, normally an open book written in large, friendly letters, creased with something resembling doubt. "Bob..." His voice carried a note of disappointment, reaching out to lower Bob's hand with Allie's gun. "We should just talk to her. You know, honestly? Without the sneaky stuff?"

Bob's grip tightened, flinching the gun away. "It's not sneaky, it's strategic."

"It's *kinda* sneaky," George countered, one hand scratching behind his neck. "What if she finds out? That's not a great way to build trust, you know. We'd be starting the whole conversation with a lie."

The observation struck too close to fresh wounds. Bob's hands began to tremble around the weapon. "Look, George, I know you want to believe the best in people—and that's great, it really is—but we need to be smart about this."

George's resolve wavered visibly, his frame seeming to shrink under the pressure and deeper into the gravel.

Bob pressed his advantage, hating himself even as he urgently did so. "Fred would do the same thing," he blurted. "You know he would. He'd take every precaution to make sure the mission succeeded. That's what makes him a good leader."

It was a low tactic, invoking Fred's influence. Bob knew it, could taste the familiar sourness of manipulation on his tongue. But desperation had a way of eroding principles, and he was desperate to prove himself.

George's shoulders slumped in defeat, all four arms dropping to his sides. "Alright," he sighed, then began his psychical preparation; rolling his shoulders and adjusting his cap to what he believed was a more welcoming angle. "So... how do I look?"

Bob scanned over the alien, pausing a moment before forcing a timid wink. "Like a real lady-killer—metaphorically speaking," he coughed. "Now get going! I'll be there soon."

He gave George a gentle push, watching him float down the uneven terrain until he was halfway to the diner before mentally preparing his own approach. Behind Bob's shoulder, the Hoo Hoo hovered silently, staring with unblinking orbs that felt more judgmental than encouraging.

"Hey, you got any better ideas, feel free to speak up." Bob frowned at the creature.

"Hoo," it chirped.

"Oh. Right."

The interior of the diner committed fully to its Earth-retro aesthetic with archaeological dedication. Red vinyl booths lined the windows, their surfaces cracked but clean. Checkerboard floor stretched with tiles so polished they reflected the stools bolted at regular intervals. A jukebox stood near the back cycling through songs that hadn't been popular in eons.

A few patrons dotted the diner: a hooded figure in the corner booth, a merchant making a deal with a small nervous alien, and someone face-down at a side table, apparently murdered with pancake syrup.

Behind the counter, a waitress wiped down the already-clean surface. She didn't look up at George's entrance, though the bell had clearly announced his arrival. Her expression suggested she'd witnessed enough strange occurrences in this establishment to make him barely register on her scale of noteworthy events.

And then there was Allie. She poked at her plate with the tip of her utensil making absent, minute orbits over her dessert. When he approached, her third eye performed its own reconnaissance, needle-sharp and unblinking, pegged on George and holding him utterly in its crosshair.

His throat constricted in this paused moment of weakness. But eventually he composed himself with a gulp, wiring his most affable smile into place as he eased forward through the

air, buoyed by pure resolve.

Sliding onto the stool beside her required some maneuvering—managing it with only minimal squeaking of protest from the base. Several moments passed before he cleared his throat and dived hand-first into her space.

"Hi!" George's voice detonated through the diner; a sonic boom of forced cheer that rattled the jukebox mid-song and made even the syrup-faced corpse twitch. "My name's—"

"I know who you are." Her voice arrived mechanical and raspy. She didn't bother using her main eyes to look at the massive hand hovering in her peripheral vision. Her fingers found his with her third eye still on him. "You're George."

He blinked, letting her hand fall from his before he sheepishly tucked it away. "That's right," he managed, forcing a chuckle that came out squeaking. "And you must be Allie."

Finally all her eyes scanned him in a brief assessment, leaving George with the feeling of being appraised at auction and found overpriced. "Fancy seeing a Galactic Superhero in these parts," she drawled, returning to scrape the pie on her plate. "But I suppose you're here for a reason."

The accent sat wrong in her mouth. Too studied, like she'd learned basic speech from old broadcasts and a dictionary. George pin-pointed it to deliberately cultivated neutrality with an inconsistent southern twist.

"Ah—well, the main reason I'm here is to talk." George hunched his shoulders forward, hoping she could tell he was genuine. "If that's okay with you."

She pivoted on the stool, crossing arms and legs in one fluid sequence. "Go on, then," she challenged, raising a fork with a piece of pie stuck to it. "Give me your best opener. I won't interrupt this time."

"Oh, okay—thank you." The stool suddenly felt very small, and very far from the door. "Uhm, so," he started, sweat beading as he drummed out a hum. "Nice day, huh?"

Allie's fork paused halfway to her mouth. "That it?"

"Is it bad?" George's face fell. "I'm still working on my small talk. Fred says I'm too direct, but Sue says being authentic is more important than being smooth, telling me to be myself but that seems like *really* vague advice when you think about it—"

The sound of Allie's fork setting down stopped his spiral. Her eyes had shifted from dismissive to sharp examination. "Your siblings," she started, her tone making it not quite a question. "They give you conflicting advice."

George felt a prickle on his nerves. "They usually do, yes. You know them too, don't you?"

"Of course I do." Allie's expression warmed. "I've followed your family's work for years. Big fan."

The sincerity in her voice caught George completely off guard. He'd expected the hostility and aggression, but certainly not admiration. His face lit up like someone had plugged him into a power source. "Really? You have?"

"Mhm." Allie nodded and turned to reach for her drink. George noticed how her posture relaxed incrementally. "The battle against the Fish Armada was no small thing. But how you kept on fighting until the very end?" She took a sip. "That impressed me the most."

George's cheeks flushed a deeper shade of pink. "Oh, well, I mean—we all had a role to play. Though you know how mine turned out..." He rubbed a shoulder.

"And yet here you are." Her third eye blinked while the others lazed. "Talking to me."

"Yeah." George felt an unfamiliar bloom in his chest—validation from someone who wasn't family, who didn't have to like him. "Here I am."

Outside, Bob crouched under Fingerhead's ship. He pressed a hand against the hull, brushing over a hodgepodge of salvaged parts and questionable repair jobs. Finding what he was looking for, he opened a panel and began working on bypassing the security measures.

The interface beeped defiantly, flashing red in Bob's face. "Come on," he muttered, jabbing at the buttons. "Work with me here."

"Hoo," came a sound from directly behind his ear.

Bob didn't turn. "Not now, okay? I'm concentrating."

"Hoo Hoo!" the creature chirped more insistently, but again Bob ignored it until it huffed away with an annoyed frown.

Cycling through another failed attempt, Bob's jaw clenched. Fingerhead's security system was far more stubborn than he'd anticipated, each encryption more paranoid than the last. Of course the fisherman wouldn't make this easy.

Back inside, George couldn't have beamed brighter if he'd swallowed a star. "You've been around," he ventured, gesturing with a slice of pie he half-chewed. A crumb stuck to his lip. "Seen a lot of the galaxy?"

"You could say that," Allie agreed, almost chipper. "My work keeps me moving."

"What kinda work?"

"Freelance." The word came out smooth as silk over razor wire. "Contract-based. I go where the jobs are."

George accepted this at face value, his attention already drifting to the next topic. He'd forgotten entirely about Bob and the whole plan they'd discussed. In this moment, sharing pie with someone who was easy to talk to, the mission seemed distant and unnecessarily complicated.

"Sounds exciting! Flexible hours?"

"Very." Allie's lips twitched. "And the retirement plan is literally to die for."

"Oh." George swallowed. "That's dark."

"It's honest." She tilted her head, studying him lazily. "You don't do honest much in your line of work, do you? Everything's press releases and damage control."

"Fred handles that stuff." George took another bite of pie. "I mostly just handle the damage."

"The creating or the controlling?"

"Um, both?" George shrugged. "I'm multitalented." He winked, wiggling every finger his four arms had to offer.

"I noticed." Her tone was fully playful now, the edge dulled to a light tease.

George giggled, kicking his feet. "Wow," he mumbled, mouth hanging open slightly as he looked down at his plate. "This pie is awful!" Despite his claim, he swallowed the remains with a satisfied lick.

Allie smiled, abandoning whatever remark she had lined up. "People don't really come here for the food."

"Hm—what do they come here for, anyway?" He inquired, wiping away the mess off his face with a napkin she offered.

Allie swiveled to track the handful of other patrons, all of whom she knew had warrants in multiple systems. "Anonymity," she managed simply. "And the fact that nobody asks questions."

"Oh." George followed her gaze, finally noticing the atmosphere in the diner. "That makes sense."

"But today is *different*," she sighed, expressing resignation. "You have a lot of questions."

"I have a lot of pie to finish," he replied stoically, gesturing around his belly. "I assure you, the questions are optional."

"Are they?" Her eyes, minus the third, glinted with surprise. Though it was guarded, it was also unmistakable.

"Yeah," he assured confidently. "They are. If you want me to leave, I'll leave. If you want to talk about the Fish War, we can do that too." He paused, then added with a small smile, "Though I should warn you, I've told that story so many times I've started adding musical numbers."

Allie stared at him for a long moment. Then, unexpectedly, she snorted like a pig. "A musical about war."

His smile peaked at her reaction. "Fred says it's overkill, but Sue thinks it adds character."

"Again with the siblings." Her grin faltered, but still lingered. "They're always with you, aren't they?"

"In spirit." George placed a hand at his heart. "And with very specific criticism."

"Must be nice." The words came out quieter than she probably intended. "Having people who care enough to criticize."

"You... don't have that?"

"I have contracts." Allie's voice had gone mechanical again. "And, well, I never really *needed* anything else."

George felt his heart ache for her. He knew that loneliness all too well. "But Allie," he started softly, "it doesn't have to be that way." His lower hands fidgeted with his napkin. "Everyone deserves people who care about them—even if they're sometimes *mean* like Fred, or *babying* like Sue."

The space between them fell silent.

"Why don't you come with us?" George persisted. "Bob and me, I mean. He's out there somewhere. We could show you what it's like to just hang with friends!"

"You don't even know me," she sobered, but there was a new crack in her voice.

"I'd like to, though." George blushed, seeing her pupils grow. "And who knows? Maybe you could even work things out with your dad. I bet deep down, Old Fingerhead really does—"

Allie's postured stiffened, but only half in reaction to his words. The diner's bell chimed. The door swung open, admitting three figures dressed in identical black outfits, their faces obscured by sleek masks with narrow slits for eyes.

Allie's face hid it's alert vigilance. Her third eye followed the newcomers while the other two remained fixed on George, hastily calculating something behind their turquoise depths as she pretended to listen to him. They hadn't approached yet, but their intent was clear—they were staking the place out.

Beneath the counter, Allie's hand moved to her hip, fingers brushing against a weapon she suddenly remembered she didn't have. Her mind raced. The masked figures were advancing slowly, deliberately spreading out to block potential exits.

George, oblivious to the shift in atmosphere, continued to chatter. "—and we could find better pie somewhere else, or maybe—"

Allie needed a plan, and fast. Her gaze swept George's innocent face, and suddenly, she had it. "George, quiet please," she whispered, voice trembling as she clutched one of his arms. "Those men—they're *dangerous*. They've been hunting me."

George finally noticed the masked figures. He squinted at them, then glanced out the window where their ships were now visible. Recognition dawned on his face. "Hey, I know those guys!" he exclaimed excitedly at the unexpected connection. "Those are the shark-ships that attacked me and Bob earlier! Fred thought they were working for you."

Her grip tightened on his arm, nails digging in slightly. "Listen to me," she hissed. "They're *killers*. They won't hesitate to hurt everyone in this diner for any reason. I—I need your help."

She wasn't disappointed at his reaction. George's expression hardened from confusion to determination. His four arms flexed, muscles rippling beneath as he rose from the stool, placing himself protectively between Allie and the masked figures. "Stay behind me," he instructed, voice dropping to a heroic baritone.

The leader of the masked trio approached, hands raised in a placating gesture. "We just want to talk to the lady," he said, distorted through the mask. "We have good news. Our employer would like to revise his offer."

"Back off," George warned. "You're little gang attacked me and my friend not too long ago. Whatever you're selling, I ain't buying. And neither is she."

"Is that right?" The masked man turned his head to his group, then back to George. "Look. You don't know the situation, friend. I'm sure that was a misunderstanding we can work out."

"Don't listen to them," Allie insisted behind George's shoulder. "They'll say anything to get what they want."

It was all the confirmation George needed. In his mind, the scenario was clear: a woman being harassed by thugs. His role, equally clear: the hero who would save her.

"I said, back off!" George bellowed. "Or you'll have to go through me first."

The leader sighed as he reached for the baton at his side. "Have it your way."

A fight of epic proportions erupted through the diner. Patrons scattered, diving under tables or fleeing through the exit as debris flew over them. The waitress merely grumbled and reached for a mop, as if this were a regular Tuesday occurrence.

When the dust settled, George stood at the epicenter of destruction, breathing heavily as he surveyed what his instincts had wrought. The pursuers lay scattered across the floor like discarded action figures. All unconscious.

"Allie! Are you okay?" he called, turning to where she had been.

But Allie was gone.

George searched the demolished diner, confusion replacing his adrenaline high. He checked under tables and behind the counter, calling her name. The waitress, calmly sweeping glass shards into a dustpan, raised an eyebrow at his frantic search. He approached her, pulling out a handful of credits from his pocket.

"Sorry about the mess," he hurried, pressing the money into her unimpressed hand. "Did you, uh, see where my friend went?"

The waitress pocketed the credits and pointed outside. George thanked her and zoomed away, bursting past the door. The Spiky Planet's gray landscape stretched in all directions, but his attention immediately fixed on a more urgent problem.

There, near Fingerhead's ship, was Bob—completely ensnared in what looked like a net trap against the hull. "George, stay back!" he yelled, straining against the mesh. "I triggered some kind of security defense. I don't know what else might—"

A figure emerged from behind the ship. Allie moved with no trace of the frightened woman she was. She approached Bob calmly, studied the trap for a moment, then pressed something on her wrist device.

The net retracted, dropping Bob onto the sharp rocks below. Before he could scramble to his feet, Allie tapped another button. A new net shot out, this time binding the explorer's legs and hands tightly behind his back before detaching itself from the ship.

"I'll take that," she rasped coolly, reaching into Bob's pocket and extracting her modified plasma weapon. She weighed it in her hand, reclaiming what was rightfully hers.

George landed beside them, beaming with relief. "Allie! You're okay! I was worried for a sec."

"Don't come any closer," she commanded, her voice turned to stone as she pointed the weapon directly at George's chest.

George froze with his hands up. "Wha? I... I don't understand." He shook his head as he slowly backed away. "I thought we were becoming friends? That you needed help?"

Allie's laugh was utterly humorless. "I've never needed anyone's help. Especially not from some gullible superhero who thinks he can solve my *daddy issues*."

"But—"

"Save it," she cut him off. "I was never going to be reasoned with, George. Not by *you*, not by your *family*, and certainly not by my *father*." Allie raised a finger. "And for the record," she added, "I do have people who care about me."

As if summoned, a familiar red shape darted out from behind the ship. The Hoo Hoo—their guide, their supposed ally—flew directly to Allie's side and wrapped its tiny arms around her neck in an affectionate embrace.

"Good job, Red," Allie cooed, holding the creature against her.

George and Bob stared in stunned silence.

"You?" Bob squeaked, then began straining in his restraints once the realization fully hit. "You little *traitor*! You led us right into her trap! You—*mmmpf!*" His tirade ended abruptly as

Allie approached and gagged him with a strip of cloth torn from her pocket. The muffled curses continued, his face flushing with fury while squirming in the dust.

"Much better," Allie remarked, then gestured toward the ship with her weapon. "Now, George, be a good boy and carry your friend inside."

The air felt suddenly charged, like the moment before lightning struck. George realized, belatedly, that he'd stumbled into a test of sorts, maybe, or at least a decision to make. Sue would've known which. Fred would've had a plan of action.

George had only his faith.

In the end, he surrendered to her demands, lifting the still-struggling Bob who continued making indignant noises through his gag. "It's okay, Bob," George reassured as they approached the ship's entrance. "Everything's going to be okay."

Bob's eyes widened, his brows knotted in frustration and disbelief. Even now, with disaster staring them in the face, George refused to see the worst in people. His optimism was either his greatest strength or his most dangerous weakness—possibly both.

Chapter End Notes

headcanon: THIS CHAPTER IS KINDA TRASH.

anyway yeah, a writing blockage has been kicking me a new one so this is the best I could do for Allie's introduction (I hope she's at least intriguing!)

the next chapter I'm actually excited for. it's a big one, and a blast from the past... oh also, FINGERHEAD WAS RIGHT—never trust a HOO HOO!!

Chapter 11: Just Let Me Go

Chapter Summary

readers might wanna read this one slowly, as there's a lot of transitional time jumps that might be a bit disorientating lol (purposefully)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The laser beam missed the group of Hoo Hoos by an atom.

Old Fingerhead trembled before the targeting system, bathed in a glow red as fresh blood within his ship's cockpit. Another Hoo Hoo darted past the viewport, its small body cartwheeling through space as prey that knew death followed close behind.

He fired again. And again.

The fisherman grimaced at every missed shot. Around him, the vessel's interior had become a war zone of his own making. Panels hung open where he'd torn them apart searching for the creatures. Wiring spilled from ceiling vents like metallic intestines.

As a flash of pink body zipped across his field of vision, Fingerhead swung the ship hard to port. The computer screamed warnings he no longer bothered to read. His entire world had narrowed to a single purpose: eliminate the infestation.

He'd found the first one three days ago. Just one. A harmless stowaway that had probably wandered aboard during his last supply run. He'd been annoyed but not concerned. Hoo Hoos were common enough in the shipping lanes, always looking for warm places to hide.

Then he'd found the second. And the third. And realized with creeping horror that his ship wasn't just hosting a stowaway—it was hosting an invasion.

These creatures, these parasites, had been living in his walls. Breathing his air. Touching his things. It could have been Weeks. Months. The uncertainty drove him to methodical destruction. To this breaking point.

"You sneak on my *ship*."

Another blast; inches away from its target.

"You hide away for *days*."

A Hoo Hoo cowered behind a small asteroid, while Fingerhead adjusted the power settings.

"IT'S. SO. CREEPY!"

The laser blast obliterated the asteroid into fragments, but the Hoo Hoo remained unharmed, floating swiftly back to the others.

He lined up for another shot, and a burst of light streaked across the starry backdrop, but it was not from him. The Galactic Superheroes had arrived. Fred, George, and Sue emerged like a trio of radiant stars, their presence commanding attention above their starship of justice.

"Stand down, Old Fingerhead!" Fred spoke into a wrist-watch and his voice crackled through the communication system. "You are under arrest for multiple violations of Galactic Peaceful Coexistence Protocols!"

The fisherman's gaze only intensified as he adjusted his lasers again, revving them into overdrive until they were ready to unleash and destroy everything in his path.

George had no choice. He launched himself forward. All four arms were a flurry of motion as he manipulated gravitational fields around himself. With mathematical brilliance, his tackle sent Fingerhead spiraling from his ship and into the void.

The fishing vessel lurched off-course from George's attack, the bright lights of the surrounding stars blurring and twisting with it. Fingerhead's vision was filled with the chaotic mess of debris and the sharp edges of his own ship's shattered windows.

Amidst the ringing in his head and the rattling of his broken ribs, Fingerhead could barely hear George's triumphant war-cry. He drifted away, almost peacefully, until a new sound reached him.

"Fingerhead! Where are you!?"

The voice of Fred brought Fingerhead back to the present. He blinked, finding himself in Hooland's ruins, and he didn't waste a second resuming his sprint deeper through the twisted framework once he was found.

Left at the cruise-ship ravine. Right through the narrow gap between two fused hull sections. Straight past the saucer-fountain that had long since run dry. Behind him, Fred and Sue struggled to keep up.

Fingerhead skidded around a corner. The corridor ahead widened into what had once been a central hub, connecting various sectors of the settlement like the spokes of a broken wheel. He searched frantically along the faded signs, searching for one in particular.

There.

Fingerhead stood motionless before it, his chest heaving as he stared upward at a building that rose into a three story rocket. Fred and Sue finally caught up, both doubled over and gasping for breath.

"Enough," Fred managed between gulps of air. "What is this place? Why are we—"

Fred's heart stuttered when he spotted it. A weathered placard hung at an angle above a set of double doors. The universal symbol for medical care was still visible alongside a simple graphic of Hoo Hoo babies that could only translate to "Maternity Ward".

"Fin...?"

The fisherman looked back at Fred, and whatever had been exposed in his soft expression vanished behind familiar walls. Scowling, and without a word, he turned and ran straight through the building's entrance, disappearing yet again.

"Oh, for crying out loud!" Fred threw his hands up before charging after him, Sue close behind.

The maternity ward was a maze of doorways and stairways, each one leading into spaces where life had once begun. Emergency lighting had cast everything in a stuttering blue that made the shadows dance like restless ghosts.

Fingerhead's footsteps echoed from somewhere ahead—above, and below. The acoustics playing tricks that made tracking him by sound alone a fool's errand.

"Wait." Sue pressed a hand against a wall, feeling the vibrations of the building. "This place feels..." she whispered, "like it's waking up."

Fred grabbed her hand. "Stay close," he commanded, stepping deeper inside only to be cut off by a broken door that came crashing down from a landing nearby; blue feet scurrying into the room it guarded seconds later.

A growl from Fred abruptly turned into a stomach-lurching yelp. His feet left the ground—not the gentle float of reduced gravity—but with the sudden, nauseating sensation of free fall inverted. The siblings held each other as momentum carried them upward at alarming speed.

Fred's back hit the ceiling with a harsh thud and a grunt. Sue was more graceful in her collision thanks to her brother absorbing most of the impact, orienting herself against him to this new perspective in less than a beat.

"This building is trying to kill us," Fred groaned, attempting to push himself from the surface above.

"Or protect something," Sue countered, listening to the architecture's sounds with growing understanding. "These fluctuations. They're defensive. I think we—"

Gravity reasserted itself with a vengeance. They dropped like stones and Sue's high pitch scream echoed like a ringing bell, bouncing through chambers until it seemed to come from everywhere at once.

In a distant room, Fingerhead froze floating in the air at the sound. The present faded around him as the past rushed in to claim him once more: drifting through the void, body broken from George's tackle. He remembered the pain in every bone, each breath a fresh agony. How lucidity hung by a thread.

Then she was there.

Sue floated beside him, her hair flowing around her face as she reached out to assess his injuries. "I got you," she murmured, her voice sliding into a melody that wrapped around him like a healing blanket.

The song she hummed vibrated through him, easing the sharp edges of the pain—and even his anger—as the fragments of his ribs knitted together under her influence.

"Feeling any better?" she eased.

Fingerhead coughed left-over blood in his fist before side-eyeing her. "You know, if you're gonna serenade me... you should at least buy me a drink first," he croaked, mouth forming a weak grin.

"Oh shush, you big grump." Sue's laughter bubbled up, tingling the non-existent air. "I'm only trying to help you."

Fred suddenly appeared then, his expression unamused as he produced a pair of restraints to cuff around the fisherman's wrists.

"Behave."

"Easy on the merchandise, Fred." Fingerhead winced at the sudden aggression, but his smile refused to falter. "Your sister really knows how to lighten the mood, that's all," he added with a wink.

Fred's face reddened, his anger peaking when he saw that Sue actually simpered back at the fisherman. "George!" he called out, trying to hold back from committing a crime himself.

George, still vibrating with post-tackle energy, hovered attentively beside his brother.

"Nice tackle, George," Fingerhead muttered sardonically as Fred handed him over. "*Very* well done."

They brought him aboard their ship, but not before scolding him for routinely disagreeing with the existence of Hoo Hoos. They were deaf to his counter arguments, escorting Fingerhead to the holding cell. The door slid shut with a definitive click.

Through the small observation window, Fingerhead watched as the heroes approached the Hoo Hoos huddling together behind a space-rock.

Sue addressed them first, kneeling to make herself smaller while floating toward them. "Come on out," she hummed. "We just want to talk with you."

George hovered nearby. "Yeah, it's safe now! Old Fingerhead is under control."

"We want to hear your side of the story." Fred turned toward the cell window, arms akimbo. "So we can solve this problem once and for all."

The Hoo Hoos, now confident in their safety, happily left the rock behind and began to dance around the Galactic Friends ship. Their hooing of apparent chastising a mockery to Fingerhead.

"You damn Hoo Hoos are the ones who should be locked up!" Fingerhead gripped the bars of the window, wishing he could shoot beams from his blazing eyes.

"Hoo hoo hoo!" the creatures responded, but Fingerhead was hearing none of it.

"HOO TO YOU! HOO HOO!"

What followed was a pitiful hooing match between the fisherman and the Hoo Hoos—though Fingerhead had no idea what he was shouting in their language—he didn't care. He gave them a piece of his mind.

"Old Fingerhead," Sue addressed, materializing between the opposing parties. "It's time to get some hoo."

Fingerhead growled, turning away. "I want no *hoo*."

"Maybe all of you can work out a deal then," George chimed.

"Indeed. I believe we have a proposition for you," Fred added, his presence more demanding than negotiable. "These Hoo Hoos need a place to stay. Your ship needs maintenance."

Fingerhead stared, deadpanned. "Is this a joke?"

"You let the Hoo Hoos live aboard," Fred explained. "They clean and repair your systems—"

"You... want these *parasites*... to live on my ship!?" Fingerhead's voice rose hysterically. "If you think after what I've been through that I would even consider such a thing—YOU KIDS ARE NUTS!"

As Fingerhead seethed, it was clear no one was listening. The Hoo Hoos' voices caught everyone's attention. It started with one, a simple little melody, and soon the entire group were harmonizing a new song of gratitude.

They danced and sung in a synchronized circle, creating a hypnotic pattern that drew the eye. Fingerhead only muttered under his breath at the display, shaking his head in disbelief.

But the heroes had joined the celebration. George attempted to mimic the Hoo Hoos' movements while Sue's voice blended seamlessly with their song. Even Fred had relaxed his guard, a pleased smile tugging at his mouth.

Fingerhead saw his opportunity.

The lock on his cell was simple; designed to keep in common people rather than someone truly determined to escape. He worked quickly, manipulating the mechanism with a spare pick until he felt the satisfying snap of release.

The door slid open and Fingerhead slipped through the heroes' ship unnoticed, making his way toward the bay where his damaged but functional vessel waited.

However, what Fingerhead didn't know was that he had been seen after all. Fred witnessed him sneak away from over his shoulder, his siblings still none the wiser. His expression reflected a feeling he didn't quite understand.

And to this day, he still didn't.

Fred's eyes glazed that very same conflicted hue when he let Fingerhead go. He and Sue were still being tossed about the building's unstable gravity, but his thoughts were on that day in particular; a memory cut short when his knees buckled on the ground, sending shock up his legs.

Sue caught herself in a crouch, quickly recovering. Fred continued to lay there, glancing around, trying to orient himself. To his frustration and confusion, his mind kept drifting back to Fingerhead instead of the danger around them, questioning why he kept doing this to himself. For him.

"Fred? You with me?" Sue nudged him, her intuition picking up on his distraction.

"Just... thinking," Fred exhaled sitting up.

"About?" Sue pressed, helping him to his feet.

He paused to take another deep breath. "About all the ways I'm going to *kill* him."

The building groaned around them and Sue gulped, holding her hands up. "Fred. This place is influenced by the harmonies of emotions. You'll hate me for saying this, but, now might be a good time to calm down."

A whistling silence suggested the building was listening. Fred's jaw clenched as he attempted to inhale the anger. This was harder than it should have been, but the less he thought, the easier it became.

When Fred exhaled, the building hummed with approval. Their feet felt the ground with more certainty. The lights steadied, revealing corridors that had been hidden in shadow, and deeper within one, a very familiar, yet horrifying sound: laughter, wheezing distant from where the lights flashed brighter.

The siblings instincts told them to follow those lights, guiding them through twisty little passages until they found themselves in one of the large birthing chambers. Hexagonal alcoves lined the walls, each one designed to provide privacy and comfort for Hoo Hoo mothers.

Fingerhead dangled twenty feet above them, completely engulfed in a strange green aura. A trap—designed by Hoo Hoo slavers during the great invasion—swayed from a single anchor point from a magical rod higher up.

In Fingerhead's hands, he clutched something vaguely round and shiny. His face, covered in grime and sweat, bore a manic triumph that bordered on delirium. "I've GOT ONE!" he cackled. "It's all MINE!"

"Is that...?" Sue whispered, squinting upward.

"Fingerhead!" Fred called, stepping back. "What... what did you do? What are you holding?"

The fisherman finally noticed them, eyes widening with hostile paranoia. He snarled and arched his body protectively around the object, and its strange markings could barely be seen glowing gold between his fingers.

"We're not trying to take it," Sue deflected. "We just want to know what it is."

Fingerhead responded with a hiss that would have made a rabid animal the reasonable one.

"Really!?" Fred's patience evaporated. "We've been chasing you through this death trap—risking our lives—" He stopped himself to breathe. "The least you could do is explain what was so important."

Fingerhead twisted in the magic trap, turning his back to them. With his knees drawn to his chest and his forehead pressed against them, he looked like nothing so much as a child refusing to acknowledge the adults in the room.

"That's it." Fred straightened with determination. He surveyed the room, spotting a pile of debris that might serve as a makeshift ladder. "I'm going up there."

Sue patted his arm. "Be careful."

Fred nodded and approached the rubble, testing each piece before committing his weight. The structure wobbled beneath him, but held as he climbed higher. Below, Sue watched with her breath held, ready to catch him if needed.

Reaching the top, Fred stretched toward the trap. His fingers brushed against the solid essence, just inches from securing a proper grip. But Fingerhead whipped around, kicking out with one foot against the approaching arm.

"Leave me alone!" Fingerhead shouted as he swung away from reach.

"Stop that, you idiot!" Fred barked back, struggling to maintain his balance.

Fingerhead's momentum carried him across the room. The trap slowed to a stop, leaving him suspended on the opposite side of the chamber.

Fred stared in exasperation at the distance between them. "You... absolute bastard."

The familiar sensation of weightlessness came when the heat within him grew. Fred felt his body lift. But instead of panic, a slow smile spread across his face. The solution here was obvious.

Fred poised himself like a cat ready to pounce; charging his pent-up frustration. As soon as the building responded he launched himself with a roar, using the zero gravity to propel across the room like a missile. On impact, Fingerhead gasped in alarm.

"Get off!" Fingerhead thrashed beneath him, but Fred ignored the protests, floating his way up the bubble of light.

Minutes later, a harsh crack and the trap gave way with a zappy echo. The hero floated back down, rubbing his knuckles. For one suspended moment, they hung together in midair. Fred's smug expression met Fingerhead's horrified one.

Right on cue, gravity returned.

They plummeted, but Fred was prepared this time. He tucked and rolled to minimize any damage. Fingerhead wasn't so lucky. He hit the ground brutally, knocking the air from his lungs in a single explosive gasp. The object skittered across the floor, coming to rest several feet away.

"Now then," Fred panted, brushing dust from his suit. "Maybe you can start explaining what this whole wild chase has been about."

Fingerhead didn't hear a word. His eyes remained fixed on the object, chest heaving as he struggled to recover his breath, becoming lost in another memory that pulled him away.

After his escape from the heroes, Fingerhead had been on his ship, pressing his temple against the wall where he'd heard noises for the second night running. His fingers traced the seam of the panel, feeling for the release.

The panel popped open with a hiss of compressed air and a Hoo Hoo shot out, its red body barely missing Fingerhead's face. He tumbled backward, landing hard on his rear as the creature darted toward a hallway.

"So," Fingerhead growled, "I see one of you didn't get the memo." He pulled a wrench from his utility belt, wielding it as a weapon.

The terrified critter needed no further convincing. It fled through a duct, and Fingerhead watched through the viewport as it disappeared into space. Crisis averted. Or so he thought.

As he moved to replace the panel, a strange feeling stopped him: a pull toward the dark space the Hoo Hoo had vacated. Fingerhead hesitated, but eventually curiosity convinced him to reach his hand into the opening.

His fingers brushed against wires, following a strange humming, then stopped on something solid and metallic. It was warm. Harmonic.

Despite himself, he wrapped his hand around the object and pulled it free from its hiding place. In his palm rested a cluster of material unlike anything he'd seen before about the size of a football. It seemed to pulse with its own heartbeat, as if alive.

The memory dissolved, bringing him back to the maternity ward. A blink later, and he found himself cradling a similar object in his arms. Its surface was fractured, hairline cracks spreading across its bumpy shell.

Sue stepped forward, focused curiously on the artifact. "Is it broken?"

"Stay back!" Fingerhead's hand shot up, his voice ragged with urgency. "Especially you, Sue."

Fred watched her comply, raising an eyebrow before stepping toward the fisherman. "What are you—" The question died as Fingerhead raised the object overhead.

With a single powerful motion, Fingerhead smashed it against the floor. The impact produced a sound not unlike glass shattering beneath water, the tones simultaneously muted and musical. The artifact split open, erupting into a cloud of pink particles that mushroomed upward.

Within the swirling mist, Fingerhead's silhouette wavered, then slowly straightened as he stood up. His movements were strange, tentative and exploratory, like someone relearning the mechanics of their own body.

Fred and Sue stood transfixed as the cloud began to settle. The pink particles drifted lazily downward, revealing Fingerhead with his back turned toward them. Something was different. His tentacles had arranged themselves into a configuration they hadn't seen in far too long—an unmistakable smile.

"HELLO, beautiful world!" The voice that emerged wasn't Fingerhead's gravelly drawl but a deeper, synthesized tone fluttering with wonder. "Mouthbottom is BACK!"

Tears welled in Fingerhead's eyes—*his tears*—carving clean paths through the dust and grime on his face. His body shuddered out a shaky exhale. "It worked," he whispered brokenly. "I thought I lost you."

"Oh, Fin Fin!" Mouthbottom's mouth stretched wider. "Please don't leave me in that dark place ever again."

Fingerhead's arms wrapped around himself in a strange self-embrace that encompassed both personalities. "Never," he promised. "I swear it."

Sue had witnessed the transformation with tears of her own, a hand pressed to her mouth. Without thinking, she rushed forward, arms outstretched toward the reunited pair.

"Mouthbottom!" she cried. "Oh, thank goodness you're really back!"

Before Fingerhead could process what was happening, his body moved of its own accord. Mouthbottom seized control, sweeping Sue into an enthusiastic embrace and lifting her clear off the ground, twirling her in circles.

"Sweet darling Susie! Still radiant as ever!" Mouthbottom's synthesized voice boomed with unrestrained affection clearly repressed longer than he'd been gone. "How wonderful it is to

see you again! I could just—"

Fingerhead squirmed, seizing control then. The shift was jarring. One moment Sue was being spun like a dancer in a music box; the next, held at arm's length from an expression of deep blue embarrassment. Mouthbottom's puckered finger-mouth flatlined as he was forced to set her down, taking an awkward step backward.

"Mouth, *please*," Fingerhead mumbled a flustered warning, adjusting the straps of his overalls. "She's a *married woman*."

"Oh—I didn't mean anything by it," Mouthbottom rushed to defend. "We're all friends here!" His nervous laughter overlapped Fingerhead's grumbling disagreement. "I would've done the same with George—honest! Speaking of, where...?"

Sue giggled. "We can talk about that later," she softened, reaching out to place her hand on their arm, causing both personalities to momentarily still. "It's good to see you too, Mouthbottom."

Mouthbottom beamed at her before setting his sights on Fred. "And *Freddie*..." he sang as he crept slowly forward, ignoring Fingerhead's desperate pull in the opposite direction. "Don't think I forgot about *you*."

As Mouthbottom approached, Fred remained rooted to the spot, silent as his brain buffered. Then, when the cephaloduo finally touched him, eruption.

"*WHAT THE ACTUAL HELL IS HAPPENING?!* " Fred pushed them away, brightly flushed. "*HOW IS THIS—WHAT DID YOU—EXPLANATION! NOW!*"

The entire building shook, forcing Fred to lower his stance and tune into his special sense's calming projection ability. A gentler voice sealed the deal: "*Please*."

Fingerhead sighed as his neck slumped under the weight of his own head. The emotional toll of this place had also drained his remaining energy. "Our biology is complicated, kid."

Fred huffed and pranced to a small boulder, pushing it back toward them. He crossed his arms and plopped down on it, demanding answers with his glare alone.

"I have time."

"I'll handle this one, Fin Fin." Mouthbottom resonated affection. "You rest." He patted his chest—Fingerhead's back—gently before turning his attention to the siblings.

"Well!" Mouthbottom clapped. "We cephaloduos are a fascinating species! Typically, we develop two distinct personalities sharing one body. Quite the evolutionary marvel, if I do say so myself."

Fred leaned forward. "Go on."

"When a cephaloduo is born, they manifest their second personality around adolescence—a bit like puberty, but with more existential dread!"

The siblings exchange a glance that suggested what Mouthbottom implied was more troubling than he led on.

"One takes the first-born title *old* and the other *young*. It's a cycle of death and rebirth in a single body, you see. Without my existence, Fin would've carried on living forever. But now, someday I'll be the in his place and someone new will take mine."

Fred stilled on one comment in particular. "Living... *forever*?" he mused under his breath.

"Hmm, *Old Mouthbottom*, has a nice ring to it, no?" Mouthbottom paused when Fingerhead coughed to redirect him. "Oh, uh, anyway, when poor Fin here reached that age, nothing happened!"

Sue sat criss-cross on the floor, completely invested. "You were considered stillborn?"

"Precisely! A tragic case of single-personality syndrome—quite rare and terribly isolating. Fingerhead resigned himself to a life of solitude, believing his other half would never emerge. A lifestyle he came to *enjoy, mind you*—but I digress."

Mouthbottom collected himself with a small shudder. "Until one fateful day, he disturbed a Hoo Hoo nest. The spores he inhaled awakened what had been dormant all along... me!"

Sue perked up. "I knew it. That object was an egg!"

Fred narrowed his eyes, processing this revelation. "So why did you disappear after Allie's attack? And if it's just an egg, why was Fingerhead so adamant about Sue staying away?"

"I suppose our daughter did quite the number on me. Must've knocked something loose." Mouthbottom's tentacles curled inward bashfully. "As for Sue—ah, well, that's where things get a bit... *invasive*."

"How so?" Fred ventured cautiously.

"In most species with vacant wombs they initiate a pregnancy!" Mouthbottom announced with inappropriate enthusiasm. "The spores need hosts to keep their numbers up if their eggs are compromised—a sorta biological free real estate—adorable, right?"

Fred's face drained of all color. His head swiveled toward Sue with such speed that his neck audibly cracked. "*Pregnant*?" he squeaked.

"Oh, don't worry!" Mouthbottom waved. "The exposure has to be direct and significant. Sue's brief proximity was hardly enough to—"

But Fred wasn't listening. He lunged forward, grabbing Sue's arm and yanking her backward.

"Hey!" Sue pulled her arm free with a sharp tug. "What are you doing?"

"You heard him!" Fred hissed. "Invaders! In the air! We need to get you out of here—right now!"

Sue tsked. "I'm fine. I didn't inhale anything."

"Wh—how can you be so calm about this?" Fred's arms spread wide, his panic expanding. "You should be terrified! Unless you're... already..." His voice trailed with premature realization. "Sue!?"

"I'm *not* pregnant!" Sue's hands moved to her hips in a stance that dared him to question. "You need to—"

"OH GOD!" Fred clutched at his head, pacing in a tight circle; his special sense picking up on suspicious symptoms that didn't exist until now. "Is that why I've been having strange cravings lately? The urge to *nest*!?"

"Hm," Sue snickered. "Maybe *you're* the pregnant one."

Behind them, Fingerhead rolled his eyes at the unfolding drama. He turned away from the siblings, who had devolved into what promised to be a predictable, pointless argument.

"Congratulations," Fingerhead called sarcastically over his shoulder. "Let's go, Mouthbottom," he murmured. "We've caused enough chaos for one day."

"Sounds like you gave them quite the runaround," Mouthbottom replied with a mischievous grin. "I can't wait to tell them about—"

"You've told them enough," Fingerhead countered, limping through the exit and into an imaginary sunset with his mind finally thinking clear. "One revelation at a time."

Chapter End Notes

HEADCANON: I HAVE TOO MANY HEADCANONS and this my most OUTLANDISH one lmao

so yeah this diversion was all basically an excuse to write about my Fingerhead/Mouthbottom theory on the origin of Mouthbottom and species lore—and nothing to do with Allie or the plot really... it's a fan-fic, gimme a break!! I can be indulgent! anyway, this also gave me a chance to explore 'novelizing' the original series a little with minor body horror. >:D

and don't worryyyy I'm never giving Sue or anyone a pregnancy arc lol! also, Fred being able to sense pregnancy symptoms has horrifying implications.

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